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**HIS FIRST THOUSAND YEARS
WERE THE EASIEST!**

THE MAN WHO LIVED FOREVER

JERRY SOHL
THE MAN WHO LIVED FOREVER
MILLER & HUNGER
THE MARS MONOPOLY

ACE
DOUBLE NOVEL
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By **R. De Witt Miller**
and **Anna Hunger**

Complete Novel



HIS LIFE WAS THE WORLD'S DEAREST POSSESSION — HERS THE PRICE OF IT!

What terrors were performed in Laboratory One, that its very name could cause strong men and innocent children to tremble with fear? Only the Master knew that it was not terror that was housed behind those impregnable walls but the most precious secret of the ages—the secret of immortality.

The safety of all humanity lay in the Master's silence—yet the life of the one woman he loved hung in the balance. He could buy a new lease on her precious life at the price of the world's security. Only a god can resist temptation—and the Master, though he had lived a thousand years, was still a man.

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second complete novel**

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE MASTER

The safety of planets lay on his shoulders—but he was just a man—doing a god's job.

ELLORA

She would willingly die for the Master—but how could she stay alive for him?

TARMA

Her world was a wild garden of Eden—until she tasted the bitter fruit of renunciation.

KORSON

He found a reason for living—too late.

DR. RONDING

He was fighting hard—but a virus gives no quarter.

DR. EVERLING

Like all too many of his predecessors, he had the lust for power.

***The Man
Who Lived
Forever***

**R. DeWITT MILLER
and
ANNA HUNGER**

ACE BOOKS

**A Division of A. A. Wyn, Inc.
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THE MARS MONOPOLY

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CHAPTER ONE

TERRA CITY was saffron-dusted by a combination of haze and afternoon sunlight. It had an unreal quality, as if it were about to become some sort of elf land.

In the room atop the telecast tower, stillness and isolation had become so intense that the Master's quiet voice sounded loud.

"What have I gained by living a thousand years?"

Varden, the Master's chief assistant, did not answer for a moment. Finally he said:

"You should know better than I"

"Answer the question."

Varden turned, and as he did so, the ebbing sunlight flicked across his shoulders, on each of which gleamed the single silver star of a World Scientist.

"Very well, I'll answer it." The lightness in Varden's tone was forced. "That the Master could live so long and learn so little is one of the reasons I don't believe in a Supreme Spirit. Every other man on earth—except you—is too young for women part of his brief life, and too old for them during another distressing period. *You* never really grow old, and become young again every thirty years. And *you* are the one who complains."

"We are not discussing theology."

"I am. Do you expect me to believe in an *intelligent* Supreme Spirit who would allow one man and only one man to remain immortal—and then choose an idiot? No, this universe was designed by some lunatic deity escaped from the fool house of the gods."

The Master pushed aside the stack of papers on his desk, and lit his pipe.

"Of what use is eternal life if the only woman you ever loved is dying and you can do nothing to save her?" There it was, the Master thought. He had said it, the truth everyone had known but he had never admitted, even to Varden.

"That the Master's lady, Ellora," Varden said gently, "has *the sickness* is tragedy. But it is also fate. If there is anything I could do which would in the smallest degree help either of you, I would do it. You know that."

The Master unhooked his blue cape, and dropped it on the back of his chair. Beneath the cape, he wore the conventional dress of a World Scientist—a loose-fitting maroon tunic and trousers bloused into low, soft boots. On each shoulder was the single silver star. Only the cape designated him as the Master.

He rested his elbows on the desk and stared through the swirl of tobacco smoke. "Must I accept this, then?"

"One does not struggle against destiny."

"Perhaps it is because I have so often altered destiny that I find it hard to accept what I cannot change."

"I know it is presumptuous, Master, to suggest that you are illogical, but it is obvious that whether the Lady Ellora dies of the sickness or not, she would eventually die of old age—which would be unpleasant for you to witness. Fifteen, or perhaps twenty years more together . . . what is that brief instant to a man who has lived ten centuries and will never die?"

The unusual formality and earnestness of Varden's words impressed the Master. Not often did the casual, somewhat ribald man show a different side of his nature. "You are lucky, Varden," he said. "You will live only one lifetime. And you have never fallen in love."

Varden looked at the Master and the conversation dwindled away. The Master was silent a long time. Then he said,

"Downstairs in conference room C, a meeting is going on. The most outstanding physicians and scientists of Earth are gathered there for only one purpose,—a great, concerted effort to discover a cure for the sickness. They may find it."

"Yes, Master, they *may*." Varden sat on the corner of the desk. He was a short, fat, balding man, with brown eyes that were usually laughing. They were now. "Master, you need something new to worry about."

"I do?"

"Yes, and I've got it for you."

"What is it?"

A committee of the Arborean Tree Protection Society is waiting downstairs with a slab of redwood. They have traveled many weary miles for the opportunity to present it to you."

"No!"

"You agreed to the appointment two months ago. They paid to have that damned thing hauled by Continental-Cargo-Sphere all the way from the West Coast. The presentation is the climax of the five hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Society. You can't back out now."

The Master looked steadily at Varden. "You suggested this to keep my mind off—"

"Even *you* have to keep appointments sometimes!"

"Very well. However, if the honorable Society has succeeded in transporting their monumental slab this far, they can certainly bring it up here. I will not go down to the Audience Hall."

"They plan to make the presentation in this room. Of course they want a telerecord of the ceremony, and the recording equipment is up here. I will send for the technicians."

"And you will pour me a double brandy."

Varden poured the drink and went out.

The Master's long, powerful fingers gripped the glass,

and once more his thoughts went back to the woman who was dying in the blue-walled, sunlit bedroom. The old irony stabbed at him. Ellora would die, and there was nothing he could do about it. With all the power in the world at his disposal, he could not keep one heart beating an hour longer.

In an effort to pull his thoughts away, he tried to visualize the committee of the Arboreal Tree Protection Society. They would be insignificant, ordinary people, not scientists or even political emissaries. Yet they had a right to meet The Master and present him with a silly slab of redwood. They had as much right as anyone else. Much more, he thought, than most of the pompous statesmen and long-winded professors to whom he must talk.

The Master had just finished his brandy when he saw the procession coming across the bridge which connected the Telecast Tower with the main block of World Center buildings. Varden was in the lead. Behind him, four men struggled with the gigantic slab. At the rear of the group marched a young woman.

The slab stuck in the doorway but finally, with some adroit coaching by Varden, they pushed it through. When the committee members had assumed their stance beside the slab and the Master knew the speech was almost upon him, he rose and signalled the telerecord technicians.

Standing behind the desk, the Master looked even taller than the six feet three inches that the world knew so well. His age might have been anywhere from fifty to sixty. His body was spare, almost gaunt, as if the clothing of flesh were too small for his big frame. But the body of the man was only an out-of-focus background for the eyes; the flow of time itself seemed to exist in their grey depths.

"Good afternoon. May I welcome your Society to World Center." There could be no doubt that it was the voice of the Master of the world. "This presentation by your organization is an honor which I deeply appreciate."

The young woman stepped forward and whisked a manuscript from somewhere beneath her green robe. Her hands shook violently and she had difficulty in reading.

"This slab was cut from a giant Sequoia which died in the present year, the year 3097. Science has proven that each ring of such a tree represents one year of growth. Thus it was ascertained that this tree began its life in the year 100. As you can see, we have carefully marked certain rings which indicate important dates since that year."

The young woman extracted a telescopic pointer from some other sanctuary beneath her robe, and began extending the rod to its full length. The Master had trouble keeping his face composed. The pointer stuck halfway, and one of the committee stepped briskly forward and helped the girl unjam it. With the end of the pointer, she indicated a date printed on a ring near the center of the slab.

"On this date the Matriarchy of Rome is said to have fallen." She moved the pointer. "On this date a religious document, the Magna Charta, was signed." She moved the rod again. "On this date in the year 1776, America was founded by a group of Tea Men who revolted against the Czar."

The Master's mind drifted off. Muddling of history was the unalienable right of educators. Suddenly the young woman's voice changed tone.

"On this date the office of the Master was created, and you, the immortal one, came among our race. We do not know who you are, or why you never die. Your beginning is known to the Council of World Scientists, and that is enough for us.

"We know that without you men could not control science and the machine. It is impossible for anyone in the brief span of a human lifetime to acquire enough knowledge to coordinate the complexities of our civilization.

"We realize too, that the organization of World Scientists,

through its control of weapons and sources of power, has forever banished the madness of which we read in our history books, the madness of War. It is obvious that the World Scientists must have for a leader a man who can live forever.

"Therefore, we, as representatives of the Arborean Tree Protection Society present to you this slab as a symbol of the incredible truth that even the oldest living things on earth can die, but the Master cannot."

The Master looked away a moment before he bowed slightly and answered, "I accept your gift with a deep sense of appreciation. The telerecord of this meeting will be ready in ten minutes, but I wish to express my thanks with something less cold and formal. Varden, what are the arrangements?"

"The committee dines tonight at the Pavilion. I hope the entertainment will be up to their expectations. Tomorrow I have placed at their disposal a guide who will show them through Terra City and World Center. The following day they will leave on a special ship for an overnight trip to Moon Base."

The Master saw that the girl, surprised and without benefit of a prepared script, was wordless. He stepped from behind his desk and held out his hand.

As the slim, trembling fingers closed around his, he wondered, as he sometimes did on these occasions, if it were startling to discover that his were normal human hands, things of flesh and blood. The girl tried to speak and could not.

"I hope your stay here will be pleasant."

As she mumbled a reply, she became calmer.

He shook hands with the other members of the committee, and chatted a few minutes. Then Varden called one of the Master's guards who escorted the group out.

The Master returned to his desk. The telerecord tech-

nicians left their plastic-enclosed booth, and the Master and Varden remained alone with the slab of redwood.

Varden poured himself a brandy, sipped it and carefully placed the glass on the slab. It stood on a ring which was marked *America Discovered By Eric, A Red Man*.

"What shall we do with the firewood?"

The Master looked up. "Have it mounted somewhere—anywhere. Possibly in the little patio by the pool. But take it out of here at once."

"Always complaining."

"Varden, I have listened to your insults and alleged humor for a good many years. I have often speculated as to what action I should take. If there were only some way that you could be made immortal. . . ."

"Isn't there?"

The Master did not answer.

"Incidentally, how *did* you become the Master? Why does the world need a Master?"

"You will find complete data in the archives of World Scientists."

"Why should I waste my time and eyesight when I can ask you?"

"To put it briefly, if there were no Master, there would be no civilization on this planet."

"With all respect to your unmitigated egotism, Master, that isn't an answer."

The Master refilled his pipe. "For some reason that lies hidden behind the cosmic scheme of things, the highest form of life on this planet, Earth, is afflicted with two principal faults. All creatures in the universe have faults, but mankind's two faults are *basic*."

"The first is an insatiable desire to build endless machinery which soon becomes so complex that it requires more than one human lifetime to understand it. Also, man seems

blinded to the fact that the machine is not an end in itself, but only a means to mankind's happiness.

"The second fault is mankind's uncontrollable urge to kill its own species."

Seating himself on the redwood slab, Varden lit a cigarette. "I asked for a simple answer, not a speech."

"You asked for enlightenment, and enlightenment you shall have. To continue:

"Besides the Earth there is—as you well know—one other planet which is inhabited by intelligent creatures. Our relations with them are part of your daily work. You also know that at least one other planet within this solar system was once inhabited. Our archaeological expeditions have proven this. Then, of course, there are the creatures from other solar systems, who occasionally visit the earth.

"For some reason—which is also hidden behind the scheme of things—all of the creatures who have visited here are very similar to ourselves, and yet" —The Master leaned forward—"No where—either in the creatures whom we know in life or those known only through the ruins which mark their death throes—do we find the slightest evidence of any desire to be slaves to a machine, or to kill each other. We and we alone are afflicted with such idiotic tendencies."

Varden was standing before the great window. Outside, darkness had fallen over Terra City. He spoke without turning. "Go on."

"Our planet was in chaos. War followed war. Civilization seemed doomed to destruction. What we needed was an organization of scientists who would use their knowledge for the fostering of human happiness; who understood that man gains nothing by killing man and that the machine should free man as an individual, not enslave him as a necessary part of the machine."

The Master paused and gestured toward a large copy of

the *Oath of a World Scientist* which glowed with soft fluorescence on the wall of the room.

"Read that again. The man who wrote it—he died almost ten centuries ago—was perhaps more of a poet than a law maker, but time seems to have proven that he caught the essence of the idea."

The Chief Assistant looked at his watch and glanced up at the oath.

I will guard mankind from the weapons mankind has invented, but I myself will not carry a weapon. I will not engage in politics. Although I may hold any religious belief I choose, or may hold none, I will not engage in any religious controversy or use any power given me as a World Scientist to promote any religion. I will be kindly, considerate and, to the best of my power, understanding to the inhabitants of this earth and those of any other world. I will not own property, but will hold the property of mankind as a trust. On the order of the Master, or the council of World Scientists, or on my own discretion if a major war should break out, I will destroy all Final Weapons, even if it results in the destruction of the Earth. In accepting these silver stars and with them the power and honor they confer, I freely state that my life shall be of no consequence in relation to this oath.

Varden turned back to the Master. "What does that oath prove? I took it, and I've administered it more times than I can remember. But that still doesn't answer my question. Why should there be a Master?"

"World Scientists, like other men and women, have a habit of dying. Therefore, the organization must have at its head someone immortal, to form the line of continuity over the ages. Only such a person can be sufficiently un-

believable to command mankind's belief. Ask the girl from the Arborean Society."

"Perhaps I—" Varden glanced again at his watch and stopped. He dropped his hand lightly on the Master's shoulder. "The committee in conference room C will be ready to report now," he said.

The Master stood up. "Very well."

As they left the room in the Telecast Tower, Varden said, "Master, if the scientists and physicians have found no solution, there is one other chance."

The Master turned. "Yes?"

"This morning I received a letter from a man named Everling. I have briefly checked his record. At one time he did some brilliant scientific work. He claims to have cured the sickness, and wants an appointment with you. He stated that he would arrive in Terra City tomorrow on the afternoon magno-rocket from Asia."

"Have an exhaustive check made of his record."

"I have already given an order for it."

"Thank you, Varden."

"I have also arranged for your meeting with the scientists and physicians to be held in the living room. I thought it would be better."

The Master looked down at the balustrade of the bridge they were now crossing.

"Yes," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LONG, low-ceilinged living room was quiet as the Master and Varden entered it. The men standing around the block crystal coffee table should have been talking.

Obviously, they had heard his footsteps. This silence, thought the Master, was his answer.

He knew these men well, as he had known thousands of others like them, but he was too tired to greet each one. They would understand. He went to the fireplace and stood with his back to the flames, watching the firelight create magic as it reflected in the crystal block.

After a moment he said, "Gentlemen?"

Irascible old Dr. Ronding, biochemist, spoke first.

"Master, there is only one answer. The sickness is caused by a virus!" He jerked out his cigar, tossed it in the fireplace and pointed his beard at the other men. "These egg-heads have been talking nonsense."

"Ronding," the quiet voice was that of Dr. Venton, Director of Disease Control. "It is you who speak nonsense. Obviously the sickness cannot be caused by a virus. My theory is that it is caused by minute, invisible spores which float freely in space. We know these spores exist, but we do not know their origin. From time to time the earth travels through a concentration of spores, and one of them must be the cause of the sickness."

"Ridiculous!" shouted Ronding.

"I must agree with Dr. Ronding." It was Dr. Twining of Electronics Research. "The spore theory is untenable. I am convinced that the cause of this disease will never be found in the fields of chemistry, biology or physiology. I believe it is a disturbance of the body's electro-magnetic balance."

No one seemed to have anything more to say. They stood silently watching the Master. Finally, he said, "In other words, gentlemen, the theories are many but the cure is not."

Still no one spoke.

"You come from all parts of the earth," the Master went on. "The disease is world-wide. I had hoped that a general discussion of your individual experiences with it would pro-

duce a cure." He could not resist the irony. "I even provided a patient."

"Don't you think, Master, that we realized your hopes?" someone asked softly.

"Yes," he said. "I know this and appreciate it. And I also know that all of you are wondering why, if a cure for the sickness is possible, it would not be the Master who would find it. I will explain.

"There are a hundred other problems with which I am daily concerned. The sickness has not yet become so widespread as to command my full attention. If, out of selfish motives, I should devote my entire time to this work, I would cease to function as the Master, and thereby betray my trust to humanity. In any case, this problem is one for a specialist, not a coordinator. Before this conference began, I outlined to you the lines of research which my long experience suggested."

"We have done our best, Master." Ronding's voice was no longer strident. It was flat, defeated.

"Yet the mark of the sickness still remains on my wife's throat." And, as he said the words, the room vanished and he saw only her white, graceful throat, blemished now by the horrible blue mark of the sickness.

A voice, which he did not recognize, came from that void where the room had been.

"Otherwise, the Lady Ellora is as beautiful as ever."

The Master forced the void to once more become a room. Such things must never happen again. This was extreme weakness, and he could not allow himself such luxuries. His tone was that of the Master, or at least he hoped it was.

"Thank you, gentlemen. You have done your very best. No man can do more. I know that you are anxious to return to your homes and your work. The conference is over." He bowed slightly. "Goodnight."

Turning from the group he stood before the fire, his tall

figure blocking out the flames. As they passed him each man murmured a word or two, which he did not hear.

Ronding was the last to go. He paused a moment beside the Master, and this time the Master heard the words.

"We did do our best, Master. Sometimes—"

"I know."

"Damn it, we will win! But it will take time."

"Yes, Dr. Ronding. But there is little time—for her!" The Master drew the folds of his cloak about him, until it covered him like a blue shroud, screening him from the outside world, from the room and anyone in it.

Ronding went out quietly.

There was no sound in the room now, except for the fire, crackling and blazing. The Master loosened his cloak and let it slide from his shoulders. He sat down and his eyes moved absently from item to item of the furnishings he had collected through the centuries.

There were curiosities from everywhere: the mysterious blue of a small statue carved out of aqualite, that baffling mineral with its eleven-sided crystals, from Venus; a child-sized chair brought him by an expedition who had found it in an almost obliterated city on the central canal of Mars; a bit of an asterloid in which was an impression that he believed to be a fingerprint; a table whose top was a single piece of garnet which had been cut from a gigantic blood red mass found in a fissure on the moon; an ash tray supported by a segment of dinosaur thigh bone; a seemingly indestructible rug from Asia; a long, low divan, fashioned the year before by the finest craftsman of Terra City, and selected by him for the Lady Ellora.

Cold, inanimate treasures of the world. There was small comfort in them, now.

Around the edge of the door which Ronding had left ajar, a black button of a nose considered matters. Slowly, big shoulders wriggled the door open. A large shepherd slipped

into the room. On silent paws he crossed to the Master, and the black button sought and found a hand.

The Master's fingers followed along the dog's nose and began to scratch him behind the ears. "Flim," he asked, "do you have a theory about the sickness?"

The dog's tail expressed ecstasy, due to the scratching behind the ears. After a moment the Master rose.

"Shall we go and see her now?"

The dog led the way as they left the room.

The woman who was The Master's Lady, and therefore the second greatest enigma of mankind, was in bed, although dusk had just deepened into night. She lay propped up by an assortment of gayly colored satin pillows, staring at a book which she was too tired to read.

Her pale gold hair fell loosely around features whose purity of line made them seem almost unreal, as if a supreme sculptor had moulded them out of living flesh. Her wide-spaced, luminous gray eyes, dark circled by the ravages of disease, lifted from the book and stared into the night. On the smooth, curving throat was a small, roundish mark, dark blue in color—the fatal insignia of the sickness.

Outside the huge pane of glass which formed one end of the room she could see the black dome of the night. The evening wind carried the perfume of the jasmine which twined around a small balcony. An early night-bird was singing furiously somewhere close by.

She let the book drop from her hands. He would be coming soon. She always knew when he would come, and he would never believe that she did. How long, she thought, must she exist only between the bed and the lounge by the window. The few steps from one to the other had become a daily lifespan.

Pushing back the covers, she slowly swung her feet to the floor, then rested a moment until her strength returned.

The hideous, unpredictable weakness was upon her again.

After a moment she stood up, steadying herself with one hand on the night table beside her bed. The slim beauty of her figure had wasted to thin fragility. Her erect dignity was gone and her shoulders drooped.

Once more she faced that terrible trip from the bed to the dressing table. She had sent her maid away; she must be alone when he came. Step by staggering step she made the perilous journey that four months before had been only three swift strides, and sank down on the deep-cushioned stool.

She picked up a comb and began to arrange her hair. With each motion of the comb, she told herself that he must not see her suffer. She must always remember that it is more terrible to watch another's agony, and be unable to help, than to bear your own. There must be no tears, no discouragement, no hopelessness. He must not see.

She finished her hair, slipped into a bed jacket of cobweb lace and once more made the long journey back to bed. A touch of perfume from a translucent jade bottle and she was ready.

It was only a moment until her gay, "Come in!" answered his knock.

Flim came first, crossing to her bed with the dignity which is the right of large dogs. She was leaning over to pet him, when she felt the Master's arms tighten around her.

For a long while he held her until she laughed and pushed him away. She tilted her head a little, frowning at him.

"What have you been doing that I won't like? Such overwhelming ardor calls for an explanation."

He followed her light mood. "I thought you would hear about it in spite of my strict orders. No one pays any attention to my orders, anyway. I have been to an auction."

"You bought another musical instrument you know you can't learn to play."

He shook his head. "I purchased a complete, well-trained harem with the best references and credentials."

"Where are you going to keep the girls?"

"I shall refurnish and redecorate the International Council Room."

"This will give world politics a new twist."

He had been moving around restlessly while he spoke. Now he dropped into a chair at her bedside. Her face, her body were like familiar, haunting music; her movements were a constant rhythm, and her love the swelling crescendo of a great orchestra. And as he was thinking, his eyes, following the line of her throat, came to the blue mark.

Quickly she pulled her bedjacket over the mark. "You must not look at it."

"You are my wife—your agony is my agony." His lips twisted in a bitterly ironic smile. "I have only to give an order and World Scientists would destroy the moon. Yet the mark of the sickness remains, and I can do nothing to remove it."

"You have accomplished great things, incredible things."

"Perhaps. I have all the power that Earth has to give. Men think of me as a cosmic benefactor. But do they ever think of the loneliness beyond loneliness?"

She took his hand. "Please . . . don't."

After a moment she said, "What—what did they say, those men at the conference?"

The crushing of his hopes bowed his head a little, and he could not look at her nor speak. A quick, indrawn breath like a stab of pain was all the sign she gave before she reached out to touch his lowered head.

"I understand."

He met her eyes. "They can't help you." Fury and frus-

tration brought him to his feet, once more to pace the room that was her prison.

"No one can help you. I cannot." He was near the breaking point now.

"Remember, darling. Remember our wonderful hours together!"

"Most of them spent here, within the walls of World Center. You were twenty five when I married you—that was one of the times when I was young. For twenty years you have lived in this place. The Master's Lady! Cursed as I am to play a role so that bungling humanity does not bring upon itself the misery and horror it so richly deserves."

For an instant her voice had the old, calm strength.

"That is unworthy of the Master."

"It is worthy of your husband. There is a word from long ago which is still used every day. Did we ever have a 'honeymoon'?"

"We've always had a honeymoon. My world is you, dearest."

"Thank you for the banality."

"Thank me for the truth."

Pausing beside the dressing table, he glanced down at the frivolities laid out with such care—jewels, perfumes, other trifles that meant Ellora. "Years without end. I am tired of the whole stupid mockery, tired of saying goodbye to every human being I learn to understand and care for. To the only woman I ever loved."

"You have had many wives before me. You loved them. You will love again."

"Ellora, my Lady, I have had more experience than you. I have found during our time together that there really is only one most beloved. Why this should be so, I do not understand. It is. I accept it in its wonder."

The ceaseless gnawing of the pain was too much. His eyes fell upon a low table that had been built by some

long dead Martian craftsman. On the table was a plate of peaches, fresh and round. Beside the plate lay a knife. The Master picked it up.

"I am tired, Ellora, incredibly tired." His voice had the quietness of finality. "I have said my last goodbye. I believe that there is something beyond death. The day you go to that something, I go with you."

"Master!"

He ignored her cry.

"I have the emotions of a man, not a god." He ran his finger along the blade of the knife, then made a light, quick cut. A thin line of red appeared on the flesh. "I have the desires, the hopes, the pain of a man."

Red drops fell from his finger onto the table.

From some unknown reserve of energy, strength came to her. In an instant she got out of bed, crossed the room and flung herself upon him, seizing the hand that held the knife.

"Your life does not belong to you! It belongs to humanity, Master!"

The fingers that held the knife relaxed slowly, lingeringly. It had been a foolish, childish gesture. The release of death was not for him. As he put his arm around her waist and helped her back to bed, he said, "Forgive me, sweetheart. It was cruel of me to have upset you."

For a while he stood looking down at the white, exhausted face. Then, going to the World Center Intercom-Visaphone on its stand in the corner of a room, he pressed a button. The face of the central operator appeared on the small round screen.

The Master spoke softly. "Varden, please."

The screen went blank and a moment later Varden's face appeared.

"Have you completed your check on this man Everling?"

"It will be done in an hour."

"Meet me in my study at eight o'clock. You said Everling was arriving tomorrow. I wish to confer with him as soon as possible."

CHAPTER THREE

THE THIRD-CLASS magno-rocket from Asia carried the usual polyglot. Rows of battered couches were filled with laborers, heavy-booted and wide-belted, with tunics and jackets in the bright, iridescent colors that they loved. Some of the laborers' women were aboard; the younger ones in trim skirts and low-cut bodices, the older ones in the shapeless sort of garments that merely cover a body. Most of the men were asleep. The women chattered together or flirted casually with men who appeared to be alone.

A pale young man, who was reading, wore the graduation ribbons of the Asian University. He was obviously dreaming of becoming a World Scientist. In the couch beside him was an aging woman wearing the long robe and carefully selected jewels of Terra City Society.

On the two front couches reclined a pair who were startling, even for the third-class rocket from Asia. The man, strongly built and about forty, was dressed in what appeared to be a religious costume—but it was not the garb of any religion known on Earth. His robe, of rough, dark green material was tied with a gold sash. The leather sandals on his bare feet were fastened with gold cords, the knot of each one held in place by a single red jewel. Attached to his robe was a cowl, which was now pulled tightly about his face. Deep in the shadow his dark eyes were half closed, perhaps in meditation.

The girl wore a simple robe that was neither elegant

nor plain. It was the same dark green but the sheen of the synthetic fabric created a shimmering, constantly changing pattern of radiance. The body covered by the robe was that of a young woman, but the face was that of a child. Her hands were clenched about the handle of a small cage in which a tiny yellow bird trembled.

Occasionally the girl spoke soothingly to the bird. Her soft voice did not follow the pattern of any language, not even the lilting cadence of Venusian speech. But the bird seemed to understand and gradually stopped its shivering.

The man and the girl had not spoken since boarding the rocket. Now, as the eerie stillness of magno-flight was suddenly broken by the snarl of the landing jets, the man said, "We are almost there, my child."

His quiet voice had the quality of solemnity and peace of soul. The girl nodded, but did not answer.

The needle of the speed indicator at the front of the cabin dropped from two thousand miles per hour to three hundred, and the rocket began to circle. The man looked out the window, and pointed to something below.

"Terra City."

"Yes, Everling."

"Tarmo, we are here at last!"

"Why did we come? Why did we leave our peace in the old tower? Why did we leave the animals we love? Why could we bring only this one with us?"

"You do not understand, my child. It will take a little time."

Terra City rushed up from beneath the ship. The landing jets roared a final blast and were still. Number forty-nine, third-class out of Asia for Terra City, came in for a perfect landing.

They walked together in the bright sunlight. Everling had disregarded the raucous cries of the jet car drivers,

and had quietly picked up the two plain traveling cases which were their only luggage. Tarmo carried the bird cage. As they approached the center of the city, the needle-like shaft of the telecast tower took shape against a background of endlessly changing cloud patterns.

Because of the Master's final order for decentralization, Terra City was not large, but its beauty and ceaseless activity first awed, then frightened the girl. The life with Everling in the crumbling tower in Cheenwa had prepared her for nothing like this. Her long dead mother and father were faint images; only Everling and the tower were real to her.

The bird, Tarmo thought, is safe in its cage. It does not wonder about these streets that lead like the spokes of a wheel to something unknown in the center. But it may be hungry. She touched Everling's arm.

"He is hungry. Can you buy him some seed?"

"Of course, my child."

They stopped before a shop in the window of which a large Klynadon from a Venusian swamp was prominently displayed. Tarmo watched the slate-gray creature pace back and forth in its atmosphere-conditioned cage, while Everling purchased a package of seeds.

As she fed the bird, Tarmo said, "He must be sad. All creatures in cages must be sad. They are not free."

"I do not think so. Most people prefer to be slaves, safe in a protected, routine life. It is probably the same with birds."

They walked on, past the great marble slabs which enclosed the public baths. Near the entrance to the baths, a fountain sent plumes of clear water arching against the sky. The spray fell in a curtain of mist about an exquisitely carved nude in the center of the pool. Beside the pool stood a huge statue of the President of the Union of South America who had presented the fountain to Terra City in

2542. A small bird was asleep on the statue's nose, and a man selling lottery tickets leaned against the pedestal.

Cubes and triangles, curving lines and sharp angles had been subtly blended by the superb designers who had planned the city, built in the twenty-fourth century. Everywhere there were trees and grass, whose fresh greenness surrounded and formed a background for the magenta, coral, aquamarine, and white of the buildings.

Everling paused before a rack of free booklets which stood at the entrance of the Terra City Historical Society. He glanced through one of the pamphlets which described how the city had been built on the site of a slum-ridden horror which had been destroyed by order of the Master. He seemed especially interested in a particular sentence: *The Master exercised extreme care in evacuating the inhabitants of the original city and in finding comfortable temporary homes for them elsewhere.*

They walked on. Ahead of them, the television tower at World Center became more sharply defined against the eternally moving clouds.

Tarmo's feet dragged as if she were very tired. She had lagged several yards behind Everling when he turned and said, "Why do you walk so slowly? We have some distance to go."

She came up beside him. Her face, with its wide cheekbones and delicately slanted green eyes, was sullen.

"I don't like this place. Let's go home."

"Nonsense."

"The buildings are too big and the streets are too long. They make me afraid."

"Terra City is the most beautiful, the most important city on Earth."

She shook her head, and the dark waves of hair tossed, then settled back on her shoulders. "I don't like it here.

I don't like the voices. There are too many of them. The light hurts my eyes. It is a place that cuts."

"You must grow up, Tarmo, and forget your fancies."

She looked far past him.

"I want the stillness. I want my animals, my birds. And I want them free."

She had gone back with her thoughts to Cheenwa and the old tower of gray stone, half covered with moss and vines, the only human habitation in miles of primitive isolation. Around the tower the forest crowded in, the intricate patterns of branches and leaves filtering the harshness out of the light.

It was that soft, all-encompassing light that she could not find here. She loved the light as she loved the animals who had been her only companions. Once she had met two other children near a cold, clear pool in the forest. Later they came to the tower, making a pleasurable frightening game out of their visits to this strange place.

Everling had been kind to the children. He had been sad when they ceased to visit her. Then he had said, "Do not be unhappy. Life is made up of greetings and leave-takings. Learn from the animals. It is they that you love most deeply." She had answered, "Yes." She had really believed she did.

Someone was speaking to her. Everling's voice, in Terra City.

"You are in need of food, Tarmo. Let us rest here a moment.

They stopped at a sidewalk cafe, and Everling seated her at a table. As he sat down opposite her, he said, "The way of life is different here. You will soon become accustomed to it."

When she had finished eating, he ordered a glass of Zylute for her and wine for himself. The ruby redness in his glass contrasted with the green of her synthetic drink. Everling wrapped himself in his long robe and his thoughts.

The afternoon sunlight slanted across the cafe and Tarmo's eyes idly followed the golden bars and rays until loud voices from an adjoining table attracted her attention.

"He comes from another planet where people live longer than we do."

"You are a fool, my friend. But there is no reason to demonstrate the obvious. Any jet pusher on a clunker run knows that the Master is the only survivor of the lost continent. You can't explain him any other way."

The first voice answered quickly, "You'll never learn anything, Gondek, with your mouth open. When the great floods came and Atlantis sank, a whole civilization, a whole way of life, was gone. They had the secret of eternal life—and the Master was the only survivor."

The tramp of heavy boots sounded on the pavement and a jolly voice called out, "Sorry I'm late. Don't try to explain anything to Gondek. Waste of breath. I'll buy the drinks and call the points of discussion. One drink—life in general. Two drinks—the Master. Three drinks—love."

Tarmo turned slightly and saw a glass in a rough, powerful hand.

"A thousand years!"

"That is your ultimate. Did you ever think how much weariness, how many partings, how much agony that many years of life would make possible? An ordinary lifetime has enough of them. Would you really want to live forever?"

"Say, that's a funny idea. Never thought of it."

"I suppose you don't know there's trouble at the Center right now. I haven't been able to find out what it is, but the rumor is too strong not to have some foundation."

"And you don't know what the trouble's about?" asked the first man. "It's the sickness that's causing the worry at the Center. I'll bet ten to one that someone close to the Master has it!"

"Could it be the Master who—"

"Of course not. People who have the sickness die."

Tarmo turned to Everling. "Is he—the Master—a man like you?"

"I do not know."

"Do people love him or hate him?"

"They wonder about his eternal life. A few adore him. Some envy him. Most people merely accept him, as they accept life."

Tarmo was silent for a moment, then continued, "If the Master created this city, he is not a good man. There are too many people here. Who knows what they are thinking? Who knows what they will do?"

Everling answered indifferently. "What all men and women do. To many Terra City is their whole life. Others are here on business. Some come in hope of making their fortunes."

"There is no fortune here for us."

"Tarmo," Everling was suddenly grave. "I thought you understood my purpose in coming to Terra City was my belief that it was here I could best aid mankind. To do what one considers his duty is not to seek a fortune."

"Yes, Everling."

He paid the waiter and they once more walked on. In half an hour they had reached one of the high, delicately tapered walls which surrounded the World Center. The wall, with its single line of carving, seemed almost fragile; something built to enhance, not to protect. But a hundred unseen devices gave protection that walls cannot give.

The most intangible of all safety measures were the words from the *Oath of a World Scientist*: . . . *I will destroy all Final Weapons, even if it results in the destruction of the Earth.*

Only the rain and the sunlight, the wind and the fragrance of flowers, the sickness, death and tomorrow could cross that wall freely.

Behind the wall, and the three others like it, were the

Master's private library, containing the best of human thought since people began to think, and his small museum. There were, also, the larger library and museum which all persons could freely visit. Within that vital rectangle were the central offices of the Committee of the World Scientists, the Master's quarters, the telecast tower and Laboratory I.

Everling and Tarmo paused before the main gate and watched a small boy who was bouncing a resilient monoloid crystal sphere. The tremendous resilience of the ball carried it high, and a flick of afternoon breeze dropped it on top of the wall where it hesitated a moment, then bounced over.

The boy approached one of the Master's guards standing beside the gate and gravely surveyed him.

"Are you going to keep my ball?"

The guard grinned. "Just a minute."

The gate was open only an instant, but Everling and Tarmo had a glimpse of great banks of flowers, a small fountain, and everywhere the green of eternal springtime. The guard returned with the ball, and the small boy bounced it on down the street.

Everling turned to Tarmo. "Come, we are going into the Center."

He started forward, but Tarmo would not move. Everling looked at her. "Come, Tarmo."

"I won't go into that place. I won't!" Terror, stark and uncontrolled, was in her voice. "If we go there they can send us to Laboratory I. Everybody knows that. Even the children in Cheenwa. When you go into Laboratory I, you never come out!"

Everling's dark eyes beneath his cowl met hers steadily. He held out his hand.

"You have nothing to fear, my child. I have protected you always."

With Tarmo clutching his hand, Everling went to the

guard and presented a small packet of papers. The guard appraised them swiftly.

"These credentials are sufficient only for admission to the anteroom. You and the girl follow me."

In the long, low-ceilinged room the guard handed the papers to a clerk at the desk. The clerk glanced at the credentials and then at the daily check list. With a quick, decisive gesture he reached for the visaphone, saying, "Be seated, sir. There will be a short *délay*."

The bird can be free in this room, thought Tarmo. It is quiet here. He will not be frightened. There is nothing to harm him.

She opened the cage and the bird darted into the free air which was the only environment it understood. As it circled the room, its wings brushed the far wall. It shivered an instant, hung suspended as if supported by some unseen hand, and died as it fell to the floor.

Neither the bird nor Tarmo had knowledge of the concealed, highly charged panels which recorded, both fluoroscopically and photographically, the images of all those who entered World Center. The image of the bird had appeared on the fluorescent screen. The photographic circuit had been made. And the technicians would curse a burned out circuit.

The clerk stepped quickly from behind his desk and stooped to pick up the bird. But Tarmo, pushing him aside, gently closed her hands around the fragile thing on the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN VARDEN entered the anteroom, he was confronted by a somber, cowed man and a girl who was crying softly as she talked to a dead bird held in her lap.

Varden considered the scene. Handling unusual affairs was his business. He remembered the day he had walked into the same room and found the superintendent of Moon Base trying to strangle a Venusian pilot because of some protocol about the proper registry of a ship. He crossed the room and stood before the cowed man.

"You are Dr. Everling?"

"Yes, I am Everling. And you—I see that you are a World Scientist—"

"I am Varden, the Master's chief assistant. The girl?"

"She is my ward. She traveled here with me from Cheenwa. Her name is Tarmo."

Varden knelt and picked up the small golden cage with the door swinging open. He carefully closed the door and snapped the catch.

"You will not need this now. What happened?"

"He is dead. I wanted him to be free, just for a few minutes. He flew against that—"

"The photo-fluorescent panel. I'm sorry. But it isn't anyone's fault. We do not expect pet birds to fly around this room."

"It is dead."

"Death is something none of us can avoid."

"One man has avoided it," Everling said quietly.

Varden rose from his stooping position before the girl. "That is why I am here. The Master wishes to meet you at once. If you and your ward will follow me . . ."

They walked silently through courts and corridors; the tall, cowed man, the Master's chief assistant, and the girl carrying the dead bird.

As they were entering a passageway whose curved ceiling was only dimly visible, Tarmo suddenly stopped. She stood immobile, clutching the bird.

"Tarmo," Everling spoke with firmness. "You must not lag behind. Come quickly."

"No! He's taking us to Laboratory II"

In an instant she was running back down the passage. Everling had started after her, when Varden caught his arm.

"No, Dr. Everling, that is not the way. She will not go far." He stepped to a recess in the wall and pressed a button. In the dimness of the passage a tiny red light appeared. Varden turned to Everling. "She is quite safe—have no fears for her. Come, the Master is waiting."

As they emerged from the passageway the telecast tower stood before them. Varden led the way across the rose-colored bridge of marble.

The Master's eyes showed no surprise as he extended his hand to the man from Cheenwa. He had the facts before him on his desk.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Everling. Have you been in Terra City before?"

"Almost ten years ago, Master. But I do not think it will have changed greatly."

The Master touched the control that slid back the converging panel which covered the great window. The incredible gray eyes did not leave Everling's face as the stranger studied the magnificent city.

After a moment Everling said. "No, Master, I cannot see any changes. It is eternal, as you are. Naturally, I have never seen the city from this tower which seems hung in the sky."

"I find this room a most pleasant place. Perhaps you will understand, Dr. Everling, as I have heard that you, too, are accustomed to working in a tower."

"Mine is somewhat different, Master. It is overgrown with primordial wilderness. But, as you point out, all towers are essentially the same."

The Master glanced at the file folder which lay on the desk. "That file contains the pertinent data concerning you.

Will you correct me if any of my information is in error?"

The cowed head bowed slightly.

"Ten years ago," the Master went on, "you were an obscure but apparently brilliant biochemist. Then, for some personal reason, you left Terra City and isolated yourself in the wilderness of Cheenwa. There you lived in an ancient tower. The archaeologists are uncertain as to the structure's date, but it certainly predates me. Concerning what type of work you carried on in the tower I have, of course, no knowledge.

"I notice that your dress is peculiar. However, I do not associate it with any religious order."

"All that you have is correct, Master. I do not belong to any religious organization. I consider my style of dress desirable—that is all."

"Very well. The important point is that you wrote me stating that you had discovered a cure for the sickness."

"I have." He spoke quietly, without emphasis.

Returning to his desk, the Master sat down and rested his clasped hands on the file folder. "If you have done so, you deserve humanity's thanks—and mine. However, as you well realize, there remains the matter of proof."

"The diagnosis of the sickness is certain because of the bluish mark. No one has ever recovered from this disease. My ward, Tarmo, had the sickness. I treated her. She recovered."

"Where is she?"

"I brought her with me to Terra City. Unfortunately—"

"The girl was frightened," Varden interrupted. "Some fool had told her an old wives' tale about Laboratory I. She bolted. I know the guards must have long since found her. Shall I have her conducted up here?"

The Master shook his head. "I will see her later." Staring at his folded hands, he was silent a moment. "Dr. Everling, there is a fact concerning my personal life which it is vital

that you know. However, I must ask you to use discretion in speaking of it to others."

"I understand, Master."

"My wife has the sickness."

"This was already known to me."

"In that forsaken jungle of Cheenwa? My wife's illness is known only to a trusted few."

"There are other channels of knowledge besides the normal senses. It was through such means that I discovered I might be of use to you."

"Most interesting. I, too, have thought along such lines. We will discuss these matters at another time. What is important now is your method of cure."

"First, Master, I must examine my patient."

"How much time will you require?"

"My examination should last only a few minutes."

The Master turned to Varden. "Conduct Dr. Everling to the Lady Ellora's bedroom. Remain there during the examination. My wife will be less disturbed if I am not present. I will follow you in ten minutes."

Varden led the way out of the room.

Alone, the Master considered whether it would be wise to send for this girl whom Everling claimed to have cured. She was certainly young and naive. Her actions were sufficient indication of that. Moreover, she was frightened, possibly hysterical. Everling was a brilliant man, and he would know more about him in half an hour. Surely he could do without cross-questioning a child.

It was too soon yet to speculate as to Everling's merits, or lack of them. The greatest of all intellectual blunders was to reason without sufficient data. He had learned that lesson many lifetimes ago.

The Master opened the door quietly. Varden and Everling were standing by the bed. Ellora's white, emaciated face

was very still among the bright silken pillows. He went to the bed and kissed her, but her lips could not return the pressure of his.

As he straightened up, he wished that he could sit on the bed, but that would be an unseemingly gesture, something he would have done before Varden but not before a stranger.

"Dr. Everling," he said, "what is your conclusion?"

"The disease is obviously far advanced. The weakness is extreme, the color of the mark deep and its outline well defined. You will note that the reflexes are already partially lost, and—"

"I appreciate your thoroughness, but I do not wish to prolong this discussion. It will only tire her. There is only one essential point. Do you believe that you can cure her?"

"Master, I *know* I can."

From the white drawn face on the pillows came a cry, "I must not die, Dr. Everling. I must not! The Master wants me to live."

Exhaustion quenched the fire in her eyes and slowly closed the lids. Quickly, Varden picked up a glass of violet liquid and held it to her lips.

"This stimulant will help you."

The Master watched as Ellora swallowed a little of the violet fluid. Then, with a motion of his expressive fingers, he indicated that Everling should follow him.

They stepped into a small alcove where a single curved glass window created the illusion that the room was floating above the moonlit gardens below.

"Her words are significant," Everling said. "She wishes to live only because you desire it. This indicates a noble spirit—but also a great lack of vitality. It is this draining away of vitality which is the true cause of the sickness."

"A symptom, Doctor, is not a cause. Proceed, but be brief and be specific."

"I have spent many years far from civilization. In those

years I have come closer to the basic truths of reality than your science has or ever will. But you asked me to be specific. I have found a science above and beyond the data, methods and discoveries which are symbolized by the organization of World Scientists."

"Do you speak of a philosophy, or a proven cure for the sickness?"

"Both, Master. To understand what I have discovered, you must realize that the cure is based on the philosophy. Vitality is the result of the will to live, and the will to live is the result of struggle. Men are designed for struggle. Do they struggle now?"

The Master made no answer.

"The mathematical setting up of population quotas for each region," Everling continued, "has taken from men the basic incentive to contend for natural resources. The great plagues and epidemics have been conquered—and with them something against which men's bodies were designed to fight. Yet the sickness, which is increasing every day, has become mankind's doom. What, then, has been gained by the elimination of daily struggle and of war?"

The Master looked at the full moon and wondered what the men and women who died during the final atomic shelling of Moon Base would have thought of such an argument.

Everling continued. "The sickness is merely the physical manifestation of pampered mankind's loss of the fundamental will to live, the fundamental ability to struggle. Man was not designed—"

"You have stated that you are able to cure the sickness. Can you cure my wife?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Long before even your time, Master, men in the countries of the East developed certain methods of training their

bodies and minds. These men discovered the secret of charging themselves with that strange, but real force which science dismisses under the term vitality. Moreover, these men of long ago gained such mental control over this force that they could cause it to flow into another person.

"World histories mention such men, but they are treated as ignorant primitives or charlatans. The last of them died, along with most of the population of Asia, when that continent was deluged with atomic dust during one of the great wars. As you recall, ninety-five percent of the people of Asia died because they had no protection from the dust."

The Master nodded.

"From my early researches, I felt sure that a description of their methods existed. I followed a hundred false clues, but finally I discovered the ancient record in the country of Cheenwa. For ten years I lived alone, except for my ward, Tarmo, in the old tower.

"I perfected myself in the ascetic discipline. At last I became so adept in turning my vitality into another that I was able to cure Tarmo of the sickness. In the same way, I will cure your wife."

"What is your exact procedure?"

"I inject a drug which I have compounded. This drug temporarily lulls the patient's mind and allows me to work directly with the subconscious. Then, by an act of will, I pass some of my vitality into the patient. This gives immediate relief from the terrible weariness and depression of the sickness, and it stimulates the patient's own dormant will to fight and live. It is this second reaction which makes the cure permanent."

"How long would your treatment be necessary?"

"I would expect a cure within the month."

"You may attempt the cure," the Master said, turning away toward the bedroom.

Everling's calm voice followed him. "There is one condition."

"What is it?"

"No other scientist or physician must be allowed to watch my treatment, nor be in consultation with me. I must work entirely alone."

The Master forced himself to answer calmly. "I cannot allow that."

With a backward step, Everling spread his hands apart, palms turned out in a gesture which might have been resignation or defeat. "Then I can do nothing."

Suddenly, the Master's voice was biting.

"Let us presume that you actually have discovered a cure for the sickness. Then your last statement could only mean that you intend to keep the cure as your secret. In order to glory in your own power, you will allow others to die in agony. If that is the case, you are neither a great scientist nor a decent man."

"You misunderstand me, Master. The reasons for my request are just and necessary—as I shall explain to you."

Abruptly, the Master swung about and led the way back to the bedside of the Lady Ellora. She was sitting up, hope bright in her eyes.

"I cannot permit this man to treat you."

"Dearest, you can't mean—"

"Dr. Everling has spoken a great many interesting generalities. However, he has just stated that he will not allow any other scientist or physician to observe or check his methods. Such an approach leaves me no choice."

The man in the strange robe said quietly, "Master, you do not understand me. Another physician would confuse the patient, and make the cure doubtful. No World Scientist would comprehend my approach to the problem. The very nature of the cure prohibits complexity. That is why I came directly to you."

With her eyes fixed on the Master, Lady Ellora said softly, "If he cures me, does it matter how?"

Her words disturbed the Master. Would he ever forgive himself if he did not take this last gamble?

"It will take me several years," Everling said, "to train men in my methods. Until I have proven my case, I would certainly not expect the Master to provide me with the opportunities for such a training program."

"If there is a chance of helping others . . ." The Lady Ellora's voice trailed away into a whisper.

"It is only common justice," Everling said, "to allow every man a chance to prove his case."

"You are a practically unknown scientist," the Master said.

The old fire flamed briefly in Lady Ellora's voice. "Every scientist was unknown *once*."

"You propose to use my wife as a guinea pig."

"Your wife before anyone else!" she cried hoarsely.

The Master stared at her, puzzled.

"I have never been able to help you in your work in any fashion. Let me have my one chance to really *be* the Master's Lady."

He watched her for a long moment. Then he turned to Everling and nodded.

Everling bowed. "I shall begin my treatment at once."

With a deep sigh, the Lady Ellora's head sank back among the pillows.

The Master took Varden's arm and they left the blue bedroom.

At the passageway to the telecast tower bridge they separated, and Varden turned down the corridor which led to his office. The corridor was dimly lit and he almost crashed into a guard who was carrying Tarmo. The girl was fast asleep.

Varden found the situation amusing. "Rylek," he said, I

wouldn't have believed it of you. But I suppose still waters do run deep."

The guard stood very erect, the girl balanced in his arms. "You do not understand, sir."

"All I have heard all day is, 'You do not understand.' Doesn't anybody understand anything?"

"No, sir."

"I'm glad to hear it. Get on with your story—and make it good."

"Well, sir, I was assigned to stay with her. She had this dead bird, you see. She wanted to bury it."

"Was this accomplished?"

"We buried it in the garden by the little pool."

"And the funeral?"

The guard hesitated. "We . . . we put a stick in the ground to mark the grave. It was impressive, sir."

Varden realized the joke was played out and smiled. "I've got to have a laugh sometimes, Rylek. Forget it. Now carry the girl to E guest bedroom in the Master's quarters. Inform the chief maid of the situation."

A voice spoke from behind Varden. "I will carry her."

Everling took the sleeping girl from the arms of the guard. With the guard leading the way, they entered a side corridor.

Varden silently watched them go.

CHAPTER FIVE

"WHEN THE MASTER will ask the Council for a donor, and which of you chance will choose, is unknown. Nevertheless, during the coming year one of you may be called upon to go to Laboratory I and give his life that the Master shall not die.

"Or, to put it another way, the one life you possess may be required by the people of this world. You understood this two months ago when you accepted the oath of a World Scientist."

Varden paused and looked at the young men in the lecture hall. Row after row of silver stars. Approximately a hundred and fifty men this year at a guess.

He realized that the men were impatient and went on: "As you know, the normal period between donations is thirty years. However, it may vary considerably. The decision as to the exact time for a donation is made by the Master.

"The basis of your selection as possible donors was your physical fitness in relation to a simple medical fact, a fact which you could not control. The final choice will be made by pure chance. You were informed of all this after you passed the World Scientist examinations, but before you took the oath. However, at that time you did not know that you would be members of the group of potential donors.

"The purpose of this meeting is to inform you of that fact. Also, to impress upon you that you must consider this as something real—not a legend. A donor may be called for this year, and if this occurs, one of you will be selected.

"I have no intention of frightening you. If you become frightened of the inevitable, you are not worthy of being World Scientists. An intelligent human being adjusts his life by taking into account all known possibilities.

"You can calculate the chance—which is small—that any of you will be called this year. Now that I have made that speech, let me say that I don't expect any of you to be much concerned. But it is my duty, according to custom, to brief you on this matter. Perhaps I am closer than most to the reality of the donor. A donor was called during my first year as a World Scientist—and I was one of the selected group."

A wave of uneasiness hung over the room. Earnestly,

almost grimly, the men fastened their attention upon Varden.

"I am here to answer any questions which you may have. So, gentlemen, begin."

A man in the back row stood up. "If I were called as donor, how long would I have between notification and . . ."

"Two weeks."

"Many World Scientists are women," said another. "Why is a woman not allowed to be a donor?"

"It is not a matter of sex, as such. However, there is a reason having to do with—as I understand it—the very nature of life itself, which makes it impossible for a woman to be a donor. The technical background behind that point is known only to the Master."

A third young man rose. "If I should be called, how would my dependents be taken care of?"

"To your wife, ten thousand villars for life. To your children, five thousand villars until they reach twenty-one. Beyond that, unlimited free education. Your wife and any dependent over twenty-one may build a house of his design at the expense of the World Scientists. For all dependents—free medical care for life."

"What if I should refuse to be the donor?"

"The violation of the oath of a World Scientist is lifetime banishment—probably to Mars or Moon Base. The man's name and the reason for banishment would be publicly announced."

After a pause, Varden added, "Are there any further questions?"

There was an eloquent scuffling of feet.

Varden smiled. "You will now have the immense privilege of shaking hands with me as you leave. If it seems to waste your time, remember I did not establish the custom. Good afternoon, gentlemen—and good luck."

Varden's search for the Master led him to a cool patio. The sky was a pale amber from a mist veiling the sunlight,

a mist which gathered in smoke-colored clouds among the branches of the gnarled old olive trees and caressed the flower starred shrubbery.

At one end of the patio was a small pool set into flagstones. Water lilies and intricately patterned magenta marzons, grown from long dormant seeds found in the labyrinth of a Martian underground city, floated on the still water.

It was a secluded spot, a scene designed for peace. But when Varden entered the patio he saw that the design had evidently gone wrong; the dove had long since grabbed an olive twig and departed.

Tarmo, half concealed by the shrubbery, was gobbling a large piece of pie. Koom, the chief cook, was screeching something unintelligible from the shadow of an archway. The girl took a final bite, and tossed the last of the crust into the pool where a large, iridescent fish snapped it up. Koom ran lumberingly from the archway. With long, easy strides Tarmo reached the pool and leaped across it. Koom, attempting to follow her, tripped and splashed among the water lilies and marzons.

As he scrambled out, he screamed, "Stupid little female! That pie was especially ordered by the Master. I'll tell him what you've done. He'll send you to Laboratory II"

Instantly, unbridled terror shone from her green eyes. The old specter, haunting her from childhood, formless but awesome, was at hand.

Before she could move, the quiet voice that the world knew so well spoke from the dimness of another archway. "Do not be afraid, Tarmo."

The Master stepped out into the eerie light of the patio. Tarmo stared at the vapor-shrouded figure, then darted to a nearby wall. The wall was covered with vines whose tendrils were locked to the masonry by centuries. Frantically the girl sought for a foothold, found one and began to climb.

The Master turned to Koom. "I will attend to this. I am sorry about the pie, but I doubt if some other dessert will kill me." With a gesture he dismissed the cook.

Tarmo paused a moment for breath and again began to climb. However, her long robe, already torn, caught in the vines and she was trapped, clinging there, half suspended, helpless. Seen through the mist, her hair disheveled and her face covered with dust from the ancient vines, she seemed to Varden more like a trapped wild creature than a young girl.

The Master's voice was gentle. "Come here, Tarmo."

She had been facing the wall as her hands gripped the stout vines; now, turning towards him her robe ripped loose and she slid to the ground. There she crouched, her back against the wall, alert, watching him. After a moment, the Master spoke.

"No one will harm you. Do not believe foolish stories about me or Laboratory I." At the mention of the Laboratory she cringed, but as the Master's calm voice went on she became quieter. "You are safe, Tarmo. But I want you to be happy, also. Now, come to me."

Reluctantly she took a step forward.

"You believe me, do you not?"

She nodded.

While the Master had been speaking, Flim had joined the group. He sat on the grass and watched, motionless except for the tip of his tail which undulated in a slow rhythm.

"You are my guest, Tarmo. That means we are friends—and friends do not run away from each other."

She came a little closer, staring at him.

"Do I seem so strange to you?"

"No," she whispered. "It's your eyes that are strange."

"Why?"

"Because they tell me that you know so many things. Perhaps as many as Everling. But I don't want you to know me—to hear what I think before I speak. To know what I

dream. I will be alone with myself."

He smiled. "I am not a conqueror, my dear. Nor an invader of your spirit. You have my word."

Holding out his hand, he waited. She came to him slowly, with sliding, tentative steps. Hesitantly, she put out her hand and took his.

"Now we are friends, Tarmo. You will never again be frightened by the terrible Master. You can see that he is only a man."

"Yes, Master," she nodded.

"But," he went on, "you must tell Koom that you are sorry. When you are hungry, ask him for something. He will give it to you."

"I wasn't hungry." There was laughter now in her voice. "It was a kind of game."

The third member of the group made his presence known by rubbing against the Master's knee. The Master glanced down. As he scratched the dog's head he said to Tarmo, "This is Flim. He needs someone to play his kind of games. Will you?"

Dropping down on her knees, the girl stretched out her hands to the dog. Flim came eagerly to them and her arms encircled the big head. She began to talk into his ear, using a language that only he could understand.

Varden decided that the show was over and crossed the patio, saying, "I looked for you, Master, for half an hour. I find you trying to promote yourself as god-father, when you're supposed to spend your time solving the problems of humanity. The only kind of pie you should know anything about is spelled pi."

"Who was wasting whose time by eavesdropping? Well, what is it? Moon Base again?"

"No, thank God. But I've been talking to Ronding. He's screaming for better assistants."

"You know Ronding is always screaming about something.

I will go over the list of available men in the morning. Meanwhile, I shall go back to solving the problems of humanity." He looked at the girl, who was playing with the dog. "We are friends, now, Tarmo?"

She smiled up at him and he started slowly toward the nearest archway. As he watched the tall figure, Varden realized that the Master stooped a little, and that he looked very tired.

Varden dropped into a chair beside the pool and lit a cigar. Tarmo lay flat on her stomach, drinking from the pool.

"Do you go back into a tree trunk at night to sleep?" Varden inquired.

Tarmo looked up from the water, the curly ends of her hair dripping. "What?"

"Forget it. I pity any man but the Master who tries to tame you."

Her eyes were wide. "Tame?"

"The dog there was wild once. Now he's your companion. He's been tamed."

Her small, firm hand rubbed Flim's nose. "He could turn wild again, couldn't he?"

Varden wondered if she hoped he would. "Tarmo," he said, "would you like to hunt? To kill?"

"Maybe—if somebody hurt me."

Varden laughed. "You don't look as if anyone could hurt you very easily. A young she-tiger couldn't look any healthier. But Everling told me that you were very sick once."

The sea-green eyes, flecked with amber, stared past him, into something he could not see. There was no way by which he could enter the room in the old tower into which the mist often drifted, as it was drifting around them now. Nor could he see remnants of bread and bits of cake carefully laid out for the birds. Or understand the games

she had invented out of the pattern of the bedcover; games which had filled endless long hours.

"The sun went away," she said at last. "I stayed in the dark . . . in my room. The birds came to the window ledge and sang for me. . . ."

"Didn't your playmates come to see you?"

"I had two playmates once. But they went away before I was sick. They never came back."

"Of course it's a wilderness out there, but Dr. Everling must have had some friends. Didn't he bring them to see you?"

"I don't remember."

"How did you feel, Tarmo?"

"Sick."

Varden laughed. "Did you like it there, in the—"

Tarmo was no longer listening. She had turned her head and Varden could see only her profile. As he watched her chin lifted inch by inch. As her eyes came into line with the second floor balcony she became still. The balcony was covered with jasmine, and beyond it was the blue bedroom of the Master's Lady.

Everling was leaning on the balustrade. He spoke no words nor made any gesture, yet Tarmo began to run across the patio. Everling was standing outside the door of the Lady Ellora's room when she reached the second floor. He smiled and carefully smoothed the dark hair which had fallen across her forehead.

"You wanted me?"

"Yes," he said. "It is time to dress for dinner. And, my child, it appears that you need to dress."

Putting his arm around her shoulders, he walked with her along the corridor. It was so safe here, she thought. All that she had ever known of home, parents, friends, were within the crook of his arm.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MASTER chalked his cue and looked down at the three ivory billiard balls. It was one of those inexplicable days when his game was bad. For more than an hour he had been practicing and the ivory balls remained lifeless.

Perhaps it was the weather. He glanced at the sky outside the window. The veil of cirrus clouds over Terra City had taken on a leaden hue. It would be raining in an hour.

The Master turned back to the table. He missed a three cushion carom around the corner, racked his cue, and left the billiard room.

He entered a long slanting gallery in which his footsteps followed him with persistent echoes, and emerged into afternoon grayness.

The scene before him was relentlessly harsh. High walls surrounded a courtyard surfaced with sandstone slabs, precisely fitted. In the center of the court was a squat, rectangular, windowless building. The low clouds seemed to be pressing the building into the earth, trying, the Master thought, to bury it once and for all, so that soft, green grass could grow where it had stood.

He crossed the court and stopped before the single entrance to the building. The doorway was indicated only by the almost imperceptible cracks which outlined it, and the simple inscription engraved above it—*Laboratory I*.

The Master pressed the button which opened the combination cubicle. As he carefully set the dials, his thoughts drifted to what the technician who designed the combination lock almost nine hundred years before, had said:

"Master, there are one billion, four hundred million, seven

hundred and nineteen thousand, six hundred and forty-seven possible combinations. As the code cannot be deciphered by any known method, as the combination cannot be ascertained by any physical analyses, and as the use of force will automatically seal the lock, I doubt if anyone will pass through this door unless you wish them to do so."

No one ever had. He had changed the combination every week. And he had forgotten it only once. That was around 2700 when Zelt had been his chief assistant. It had been his own fault for telling Zelt that he had forgotten the combination. For three weeks Zelt's jokes had made his life intolerable. Then he had remembered the combination.

The massive nitron door, more than a meter thick, was swinging slowly inward. He followed it into the dimness beyond. The door, in response to the timing mechanism, silently swung back into its original position and, as it did so, soft lighting flooded the room before him.

With the closing of the door, the last physical contact between the Master and mankind was severed. Except for the visaphone, which he could turn off at will, he was completely isolated.

The Master walked slowly through the maze of equipment. He could have found his way in his sleep; every magnetron, every calculator, each piece of biological or harmonic apparatus was embedded in his mind, a basic part of his consciousness.

Only the North wall of Laboratory I was starkly bare of instruments. The Master touched a button and the metal panels which formed the wall began to descend into recesses. They dropped individually—starting from the right and continuing to the left. As each panel slipped noiselessly into the floor, it revealed a metal cabinet. The cabinets were identical and obviously designed to contain a normal human being, standing erect. They were sealed with thick panes of transparent, unbreakable plastic.

Within each cabinet, a nude young man stood in an attitude of dignity and pride. For some reason, which even the Master had been unable to fathom, all of the young men's faces had the same expression—a quiet smile. Destiny was over for them and they were satisfied.

Around each young man there swirled a thin, sparkling nebula. The nebula seemed almost a living thing; iridescent, rainbow-hued.

Beside each young man—and also bathed in the shimmering mist—was an urn. On the upper metal framework of every cabinet was stamped a date.

There were thirty-three cabinets. The Master walked down the long row, pausing occasionally before one of the motionless figures. After he had reached the last cabinet, he stepped back, leaned against an atomic integrator, and looked for a long time at the vista of men and dates. Once more he touched the button and the panels began to rise from the floor, progressively, obliterating the faces with their quiet smiles.

He walked, a shadowy figure, between the great stolid machines. In the short passage that led to the door which separated him from other men, he picked up an atomic torch from a small niche and pointed the beam at an opalescent disk set into the wall.

Instantly, the invisible radiation, matching exactly the radiation of the disk, unlocked the great door. As it moved outward, the Master replaced the torch in its niche, and went outside. Behind him the slab swung back into place. Laboratory I was sealed to ordinary men.

A great weight of unmeasurable fatigue, which he knew so well, settled upon him. But that was tomorrow's problem. He must not think of that. He had not thought about it for hours. Now he realized who was responsible for the relief. Varden. It was he who had suggested that a little billiard practice might freshen him up.

Enmeshed in his thoughts, he was startled to come suddenly upon the robed figure of Everling.

Equally startled by the Master's abrupt appearance, Everling averted his eyes and became deeply interested in a single, nondescript flower which was perched on the end of a long stem.

The flower, the Master observed, was growing out of a crack in the sandstone blocks of the courtyard. Superbly cut, there had remained one little flaw. A wind, a single seed, time—and a flower. Amusing to consider the flaw in perfect craftsmanship. More amusing to watch the man.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Everling."

"Good afternoon, Master." Neither the face looking out from the cowl nor the tone conveyed any emotion except slight surprise.

The Master walked past him without pausing. As he continued across the court he thought, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but too much knowledge is equally dangerous, and makes for doubt of one's fellow man."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MASTER'S desk was a mound of documents and reports. He decided on a frontal assault rather than meticulous efficiency. The frontal assault was beginning to produce results when Varden came in.

"Moon Base called again."

The Master did not look up. "Oxygen plant?"

"Of course. They're living up there on the stored supply—which won't last forever."

The Master wrote *More information needed* on a request from the Genetics Committee for a cut in the South American

birth rate, signed a grant of one thousand villars to a young scientist, and looked up.

"That Moon Base oxygen plant was built almost four hundred years ago. We now have far better methods of extracting oxygen from oxidized ore. Write an urgent order to the Council for a requisition to build a modern plant. Send up whatever technicians are necessary to repair the old plant. Dr. Bolton should head the group. Tell him to have the old plant operating in two days—if he needs string and baling wire, I will send it by special magno-ship."

The Master turned back to his desk. As he worked fatigue began to wash over him like an implacable wave. Somehow he could not bring his mind into sharp focus. It ran off on endless tangents. After a moment, he folded his arms on the pile of papers. Was there never any end to paper work? Slowly, his head fell forward drowsily, until it rested on his folded arms.

"Master!"

The Master's head snapped up. He had thought Varden was gone from the room.

"You must call for a donor—"

"It is not yet time!"

"Master, it is time!" Varden went out.

As the Master worked, he became conscious of the sound of rain against the windows. He glanced up. Lightning flashed across the Sky of Terra City. This, he thought, would be a great storm.

Wind rattled the windows in their heavy metal frames. Those old fashioned windows were an idiosyncrasy of the Master. For some reason, he had never learned to appreciate windows whose plastic panes slid noiselessly into wall recesses at the touch of a button. To him they symbolized a completely synthetic existence.

He was making a notation to change the location of two Austro-Asia magno-rocket bases, when the wind won a

brief victory in its battle with the windows. A latch gave way and a pane crashed open. The wind cleared the Master's desk with efficiency, blowing the papers in all directions. Behind it came a flood of rain.

The Master's mind commanded his body to dive for the window and close it. But his body obeyed slowly and awkwardly. As he rose, the wind almost toppled him backwards. He stumbled to the window, groping in the rain that blurred his sight. Leaning far out, he fumbled for the metal sash.

As he did so, he glanced downward. Below him the sheer wall fell, a rain-gleaming precipice, to the courtyard a hundred feet below. For an instant the world dimmed and whirled. Then his will drove his eyes back to the corner of the sash.

It was a fight now—his numbed, outstretched fingers against wind, rain and slippery metal. Twice the wind jerked the sash loose from his grip. At last his fingers found a slightly roughened spot on the metal and held. Slowly he tugged, pulling the pane inward until he could reach the latch and jam it shut.

Swaying on his way back to his chair, he dropped into it heavily. The room suddenly filled with a gray mist. Perhaps, he thought, fog had come in with the rain. Yet fog did not come with rain . . . Perhaps . . .

He slumped over the desk, arms outstretched. Rain water, dripping from his hair and clothes, formed a little pool on the polished wood where he rested his head and he spoke without moving. "Some brandy—quickly."

As Varden poured the drink, he watched the Master slowly sit up and lean back in the chair.

"Window blew open. Storm—very sudden."

Varden handed him the brandy. The Master spilled part of it.

"It will help," Varden said gently. "But you need more than that."

"It is thirty-seven years," Varden continued, "since you asked the Council for a donor."

"When I need one, I will tell you. I am merely a bit tired."

"If this were the first time, I would agree with you. But during the last general conference of the Planning Committee you twice lost the thread of the conversation. Some of your work is months behind schedule. I've been with you daily for a long time—at least by my standard of time—and I think I can judge the point when you cease to be the Master and degenerate into an old man. You know what will happen then."

"Yes, I know."

"Then you must—"

"No, Varden. I refuse to face another young man now."

Varden refilled the Master's glass and handed it to him.

The Master sipped the warming, strengthening liquid and when he spoke, his voice seemed to Varden an echo of the relentless rain beating against the windows.

"You do not understand. Every thirty years for a millennium I have forced myself to face a strong, intelligent young man at the door of Laboratory I. The scene is always the same.

"I stand there and formally tell him what he already knows—that once he walks into that laboratory, he will die. I can say nothing else. Then I ask him if his affairs are in order, and if he has said his goodbyes. Usually, he merely nods. Then I say, 'Or haven't you told anybody that you are the donor? Do you want me to do it for you afterwards?'

"Then he says, 'Forget it. But can I have a smoke and a drink before . . .' He smiles. They always smile, Varden. Why don't they ever do anything but smile!"

Varden was staring at one of the papers which had been blown to the floor. It was a formal letter, and began: *To the office of the Master: The third commission from the Venusian*

Interplanetary Travel Authority wishes to point out that . . .

Without looking up, Varden said, "What is the loss of one young man, compared with the destiny of a planet? Perhaps a solar system?"

The roar of the storm surrounded and compressed the silence of the room. The papers made a great crackling noise as Varden collected them. He placed them on the Master's desk and waited.

At last the Master looked directly at his chief assistant. "Call the Council in session tomorrow. Tell them that I want a new donor. Now, hand me that Moon Base order so I can sign it." He picked up his glass and drained it.

A young World Scientist was tapping out the rhythm of a melody played by the dance orchestra at the Pavilion. Halfway through the song, the musicians stopped abruptly. The curtains were drawn back from the huge telecast screen.

"Special announcement. On request of the Master, the Council has chosen a new donor. The donor is, of course, a World Scientist. The names of all those who were acceptable have been placed in a mechanical selector, and fate has chosen one."

The men and women at the tables reacted only with a dull undertone of startled conversation. To them the news meant everything—and nothing. It meant an enigma greater than life or death, or even the meaning of existence. It was the final enigma of the Master. But it also meant something that did not personally concern them.

"As has been the custom in the past," the announcer's voice was heavy with solemnity, "there will be a pause for a few moments in honor of the man who will give his life for the Master and civilization."

The people were silent as the screen went blank, but from the speaker poured out the opening bars of *The Green*

Hills of Earth. As the planet's hymn blended with the moonlight and shadow of the Pavilion, a young World scientist picked up his glass and finished his drink.

He signalled a waiter and indicated another round. The waiter handed him the check which he signed *Korson*.

When the hymn was over and the orchestra resumed its music, he turned to the man across the table. "I'm sorry that you didn't pass the examinations, Lorg. Perhaps next year."

"So you won't lose your galley slave at the Clinic. I'll never be a World Scientist. Remember, I'm older than you."

"You can always try again. You can have a go at the exam for five alternate years between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-seven. You've only used one try."

As the waiter poured their drinks the men's eyes wandered about the room. The tables were scattered around the dance floor. A dimmed eterno-light gleamed here and there.

Beyond the Pavilion's cafes, lounges, cool recreation rooms, gardens, and open air dance floors, the largest park in Terra City stretched for miles. Outdoor and indoor swimming pools, playgrounds for children, the great stadium, groves of old olive trees, banks of colorful flowers, amphitheatres for impassioned orations and glens for whispered words; all these were within the huge park.

Two girls walking ahead of their escorts, passed the table at which the young men sat. One of the girls spoke over her shoulder, "Don't forget the party tonight, Korson."

"I'll be there."

Lorg's big head seemed to waver on his long, fragile neck. "How do you do it? I can never take time off. Maybe a few days once or twice a year—usually when I'm sick. You know, I work longer than anyone else at the Clinic."

"There's more than simply a steady grind to becoming a World Scientist," Korson answered.

"Meaning what?"

"Experimentation in any science is something like a sculptor tentatively hacking at a block of stone. Or an artist dabbing at a fresh piece of canvas. Or a musician. Part of it is inspiration. You can't force it to come. There's no use hacking or painting, until the idea is there. Even so, you may throw out the first idea, and the second. But you can't work until you have something to work on."

"I've lots of ideas," Lorg said.

"Sketch them out in notes—and then forget them. While you're busy with one thing, you'll get an answer to something else."

Lorg's tense fingers dug sweaty wrinkles into the table cloth. "I'll do just what you said. I'll do anything. I must pass the exam next time."

The meal was placed before them. Lorg picked idly at the food. "Next time," he said. "I must make it next time."

Korson, shoveling his dinner down lustily, spoke with his mouth full. "There's plenty of time for everything." He swallowed his food and continued, "What you need—"

A hand lightly touched his shoulder.

He turned. A man in the uniform of the Master's Guard was standing behind him.

"You are Korson?"

"Yes."

"I was informed at the Clinic that you could be found here."

A paper with an official seal was held out to him. Breaking the seal, Korson read:

*Korson, donor for the Master, will
present himself two weeks from
this date at the World Center.*

His mind would not accept the fact. It couldn't happen to me. Not to *me!*

The guard saluted and, turning, began to thread his way past the tables toward the exit. Involuntarily Korson's hand went out in protest, in appeal. "It's too soon. . . ." he whispered, staring at the man's back as he went away.

Korson was on his feet, although he did not realize it. From a long way off he heard a faint little voice piping, "Korson, what is it? It—it can't be—you—"

CHAPTER EIGHT

OUTSIDE the Pavilion Korson hailed a jet car, crossed the park, and stepped out at the entrance to Terra City Clinic.

Cool, pungent dampness rose from the wide strip of grass which surrounded the clinic. A delicate scent drifted from the flowers in the two gigantic limestone urns that flanked the entrance. Above the doorway glowed a single eterno-light, around which a large moth was circling. Again, and again, the moth beat with futile, disintegrating wings against the globe.

Korson entered the Clinic, walked to his laboratory and opened the door. He was home, now. It was familiar here, safe. The chemical solution he had been filtering was dripping steadily, exactly as he had left it. The drops were falling in the same precise rhythm. Nothing had changed. Nothing had happened.

With meticulous care he put on his white smock. Then he crossed to the scarred laboratory table. On the table was an old pewter mug, battered, with the single word *Pavilion* engraved on it. But there was no beer in the mug, now. It was filled with those tools around which his life revolved: solution thermometers, pipettes, test tubes, indicators.

Slowly, automatically, he seated himself before the neutron microscope. From the rack of stained and mounted cultures, he selected the third from the right and placed it in the microscope. His sure fingers made the primary adjustments, locked them, and began the precise alignment. The image was in position. It was only necessary to focus.

Somehow, he could not sharpen the image. It blurred and faded. He realized that the core of his mind had withdrawn from visual sensation and had concentrated on the purely auditory—the sound of the filtered drops falling into the beaker. One every ten seconds. Hourglass of science. Light and steady was the beat of the drops, while time raced faster and faster.

He turned from the microscope and picked up a letter he had received that morning. It was from his brother, Kenler.

*Kor, do you remember the day we spent
together a couple of months ago? We swam
in the river above the dam . . .*

Plunging deep into the water, Korson's muscular, wide-shouldered body moved gracefully down to the flat bottom of soft mud. Spires of grass waved gently; a lazy fish passed close to Korson's face, and darted away in fright. Water closed round him, softly touching his eyes and lips.

Coming to the surface, his honey-colored hair plastered wetly against his head, he saw the water moving faster as it neared the rapids. He swam in that direction and soon his powerful shoulders were fighting the flood of white-crested water which poured between narrow banks. The roar was deafening; he could not see past the green and white froth filling his eyes. One leg scraped a sharp rock.

When at last he reached the bank, dragged himself up

and lay panting; his brother, watching him, shook his head. "You'll try that once too often."

Kenler's grave, lean face was calm as always. He looks more like a scientist than I do, thought Korson.

Later, in the cabin over mugs of ale, Korson lay flat on the floor, a long, thin cheroot in the corner of his mouth.

"Funny," said Kenler. "we're so different. I'm happy living the good life—"

"Hermit stuff."

"You in the city with your test tubes. Walking the straight and narrow past of ambition."

"Ambition's path, yes," answered Korson. "But my idea is balance. Plenty of fun and plenty of work. Concentration is the secret. I practiced early. Trained myself to bring one idea into my mind and keep it there for five or ten minutes. Dropped it. Picked up another. That's proper channeling. It's worked."

Kenler sighed, feeling ineffectual beside the brother who was older than himself but whom everyone thought was the younger. "Nothing can disturb that calm self-sufficiency . . . Sometimes I worry. You and I, since Mother and Father died—we've only got each other. Soon I'll be married. When that happens, you—"

Korson sat up, staring at Kenler. "You have a peculiarly nauseating expression on your face. Did you say you were getting married? That you're madly in love?"

Kenler nodded. "It happened suddenly."

"It always happens suddenly!" Korson said. Then he rose and clapped his brother on the back heartily. "Good luck. Be happy." Going to the stove he began rattling pans, preparatory to cooking the trout they had caught that morning.

Kenler eyed him gravely. "I hope you don't become too sleek and sharp in the city, with every little cog and wheel working perfectly. All made up of nice little sanitary com-

partments, hermetically sealed." His smile was crooked. "You'd be better off for a few bits of earth and bugs to annoy you. . . ."

The chemical solution was still dripping slowly, steadily.

Once more Korson's eyes focused upon the letter lying on the lab table. The little sealed compartments did him no good now. Should he write Kenler and tell him?

A World Scientist who had sworn to guard the property of mankind hurled a battered mug at a neutron microscope worth fifty thousand villars.

Korson was stopped at the gate of the World Center by a guard.

"I do not recognize you, sir. May I be of any assistance?"

"Take me to the Master at once."

"It is impossible. If you will leave your name . . ."

Without answering, Korson reached into the pocket of his carefully pressed tunic and took out the donor's summons. There was a faint smile on his face as he handed it to the guard.

The guard read the first line, and stiffened. Folding the paper he returned it to Korson. "Sorry, sir. Please follow me."

Erect, rather arrogantly, Korson strode behind him into the anteroom.

The guard spoke to the desk clerk and at once the clerk switched on the visaphone. "Varden—urgent."

In the dimness of his great library the Master turned around at the sound of a footstep. "Good afternoon, Varden. Moon Base?"

"Of course. Bolton just asked for you to send up the 'string and baling wire.' I hope you know what that phrase means. I don't."

"I do. Prepare an order."

"There's another little matter. You have a peculiar visitor.

This time he doesn't wear a weird costume. He's just out of place—in time. To be exact, he's seven days out of place. Korson, the donor."

In the cone of light from the single source of illumination above the desk, the Master's mouth twitched nervously and his voice was strained. "Never before has a donor presented himself before the appointed hour!"

He closed the book he had been reading. "Have Korson brought here at once. I'll outline the Moon Base order later."

As Korson stood in the doorway of the library, the Master wondered if it had finally come—the first appeal for life? The appeal even he could not grant. Well, it had to come sometime. He stepped from behind the desk, his blue cape swinging with his movements.

Korson came a few steps into the room. Among the shadows of the library, the figure of the Master was lost. Korson stood waiting, poised and challenging.

A figure emerged from the darkness of a corner. There was the click of a switch and the room was filled with rich, mellow radiance.

"I am sorry. I did not realize how dark it was."

"I am Korson, the donor."

"Obviously. And I, obviously, am the Master. Now will you come a little nearer?"

Korson took two halting steps.

"Much nearer, please. We are not on a duelling ground."

The Master turned to a cabinet and took from it a bottle and two glasses. Slowly he filled the glasses with a rich liqueur, aromatic with strange spices. He extended one to Korson, who took it in silence.

"It is only natural," the Master said, "that you regard me as an enemy. But shall we not drink to the possibility of our becoming friends?"

Korson drank with the Master and said quietly, "I have

no enemies, or friends, now. I have only a destiny— and I'm rotten at histrionics. I am no longer awed by anything, including you."

He turned his back to the Master and dropped into a deep leather chair.

"Why did you come here before your appointed time?"

"Have I embarrassed you?"

"Yes," the Master said simply.

The calm directness bothered Korson a little. He looked at the Master. The eyes bothered him, so he glanced away.

"I want to get this business over with," he said. "This afternoon if possible. At the latest, tonight."

"Your approach is certainly different from all the others. Remember, you have seven days left. If you are a profound young man, you will use them to make peace with your soul."

The authority in this unusual cloaked figure made Korson assert himself. "Aren't you being a trifle dull about this little affair, Master?" He went to the cabinet and poured himself another drink. "I've left my laboratory." For an instant his voice almost got out of control. "It's up to you to find someone to finish my job. I don't say farewells. As for my soul—if I have one—what could I do in seven days?"

The words hung in the air between them, for the Master did not answer.

After a moment Korson said roughly, "I could spend my time polishing my stars."

"That remark, Korson, is unworthy of you."

He felt a wave of shame pass over him such as he had never known before, and the blood came up in his cheeks. Yet he told himself persistently that the Master was only a figurehead, who did not have to do the dying.

"Seven days. It is death, isn't it?"

The Master did not answer.

"Finish the job now!"

"It is out of my hands. The Council sets the hour."

Putting down his glass, Korson wandered about the library. Most of the books on the banks of shelves before him dealt with philosophy. Parchments in long forgotten languages were stored in racks. Tablets which bore strange inscriptions were encased in clear, protective plastic.

Here, and here alone on Earth, were assembled the finest, most profound thoughts of men. This was the ultimate treasure house of human wisdom—and before him stood the man who should be the wisest of men. Perhaps he *could* find an answer in seven days. It was also the way to exact payment from the man for whom he must die.

"Master, you have about you the work of the most brilliant minds of all ages. The greatest teachers and philosophers. You have studied all of them, and weighed their arguments. Many of their discussions deal with death, and what—if anything—comes afterwards. I might learn a great deal even in seven days—with *you* as my instructor!"

Korson saw the blow had found its mark. The face before him became the face of a tired old man, and the voice halting.

"Force me . . . to see you . . . every day?"

"Yes." Korson's face was hard with victory.

"The young are cruel."

"You will have plenty of time to recover."

Silently, the Master turned away for a moment. At last he murmured, "That is true."

As Korson continued, he knew that he was beaten. "You offer me nothing but death. The least you can do is give me the wisdom to meet it as I should."

There was no help for it, the Master realized. For seven days he must accept the torment this young man demanded of him.

"You cannot expect me," he said slowly, "to solve the final riddle in seven days or seven lifetimes. However, you may stay. A room will be assigned to you in my private

quarters." He paused and added quietly, "I ask that you look within your own innermost being and answer one question. Do you honestly believe that I am happy when I meet a donor at the door of Laboratory I?"

CHAPTER NINE

THE FIRST DAY was ebbing. Korson and the Master had been talking during the late afternoon. Now, Korson rose and stood beside the desk.

"If it won't inconvenience you, Master, I would prefer that my status here be that of a protege. It may sound odd and cause some rumors, but I would rather no one knew I was the donor."

"I understand."

"Thanks."

"Our discussion has been most interesting, Korson. I wish we could continue. But that sublimely cursed Moon Base is still in trouble."

"Can I be of any help?" Instantly, Korson realized what he had said.

The Master smiled. "I'm afraid not. I suggest you wander around the gardens and try to be happy, but if you are still determined to solve the final mystery, you might read the passages I have marked in those volumes."

Korson picked up the stack of books."

"The evening meal is at seven-thirty," the Master added. "Will you join us?"

"Of course."

Korson walked through the gardens until he reached a grove of pines that towered like grounded lances in the fading light. Laying the pile of books on the thick pad of

fallen needles, he dropped down on the ground. For a moment he stared through shafts of hazy amber sunlight, upward to the sky with its eternally restless clouds. Then, settling himself comfortably, his back against a tree, he opened a book.

Concentration was difficult. The strangeness of this tiny world dominated his thoughts. That morning, as he had passed through another part of the grounds, he had seen, through the pale mist, the swiftly moving figure of a girl. Her movements had an unearthly quality. Dancing lightly, arms moving like willows in the wind, lithe young body clothed only in an iridescent gossamer robe, she had disappeared behind the coral trumpets of a Xalpan tree.

He pulled his thoughts back and flipped over the pages of another book. Again he tossed it aside, and listened to the sound of birds twittering, calling to each other in soft, excited notes. For a moment he thought that he heard a human voice join the conversation, speaking not in the language of man, but in rhythmic half-tones, resembling Chinese music.

Curious, he stood up and walked in the direction of the sounds. Threading his way among the pines, his footsteps muffled by the needles, he came to a small patio in the center of which was a tiny pool.

Standing beside the pool was a girl, the same girl he had seen that morning. Her back was to Korson. A bird was perched on each of her shoulders, another on her wrist. Korson had taken a few steps toward her when his heel clicked on a stone.

There was a fluttering of wings and the birds were gone. Tarmo whirled around.

"You frightened them away! They come every day to talk to me. They are my only friends here!"

"I'm sorry."

She darted past him, but he caught her arm.

"Do you live here? What's your name?"

Tarmo tried to free herself, but could not. Puzzled, she looked up at him. "You're stronger than the others."

"Am I?"

He released her arm but, not moving, she continued to study his face.

"You're younger, too." Her eyes slid away from his face, sideways, searching the grass. One small foot took a hesitant step, and paused. A few of the birds returned, to hover over her.

He smiled. "Funny child."

"First Varden calls me a female, now you call me a child."

"You're both, aren't you? And beautiful. You've been told that, haven't you?"

What was strange about him, about his voice? Everling had never spoken to her like this, nor Varden, nor even the Master. It must mean something, she thought, but it is something I do not understand. And it is something I do not want to run away from.

Korson came close to her. He slipped his hand beneath her chin, lifting her head. She stiffened, instinctively bracing against his wordless challenge. "Now you're somebody else. I don't like the somebody else."

"You will."

Gently she raised his hand to her lips. Then, deliberately her small teeth clamped hard of his fingers. He jerked his hand away and sucked the fingers.

She went back to the pool, dropped into one of the chairs beside it, and curled her feet under her. Korson stretched out in the grass and lit a cigarette.

"Do you live here?" she asked.

"I'm here on business with the Master."

"You shouldn't have come. You might have to stay inside these walls, like I do."

"Who are you? Why are you here?"

"I'm Tarmo. The Lady Ellora is sick. Everling is curing her. And I must be with Everling. He has always taken care of me."

"He must be a fine man. Your father?"

"No. I don't remember my father—or my mother. . . .

"Guardian?"

"No. He doesn't guard me."

A mass of purple cloud trapped the last bit of gold from the setting sun and sent a shaft of light into the grove. Tarmo's hair was blue-black as Korson leaned closer to her, his boldness gone, and his tone gentler. "It's the light on your hair . . ." He could not take his eyes from her. "Shining on your hair . . ."

She raised her head suddenly, as if she were listening.

"Yes," she said, but she was not speaking to Korson.

The rustle of a long robe caused Korson to turn as a quiet voice spoke.

"Go to your room, my child. Do not spend so much time dreaming by the pool. Read the lessons I have given you, then dress for dinner."

Cowl and sparkling ruby. Certainly this was a haunted grove, thought Korson, as he studied the powerfully built man.

When Tarmo had gone, Everling looked at Korson steadily. "I understand that no one is allowed here except on special business."

"I *am* on special business."

"Important enough to permit you the freedom of the Master's private gardens?"

"Yes."

Everling's voice carried no trace of anger. It merely stated a fact. "My ward is very charming—and very young. If you have followed her here—"

Korson's patience ran out. "I don't know who the hell *you* are with your head hidden inside that damn sack, but

I will not be called a liar—even in fancy words. I'm here because *I am the donor!*"

Twilight, silence, a haunted grove. Everling's hoarse tones seemed loud.

"Please forget what I've said. I am Dr. Everling. At present I am treating the Master's wife."

"I'm Korson."

The eyes deep within the shadow of the cowl caught the glint of silver on the young man's shoulder. "World Scientist?"

Korson nodded.

"Sorrow is part of life, but the giving of a life before it is fully consummated is more than sorrowful. It is tragedy, and therefore noble."

The man was harmless, but boring, Korson thought. He was searching for an easy method of breaking off the conversation, when Everling continued:

"This particular tragedy is part of our governmental system. We have accepted it as a lesser evil to others we have known. Curious. Similar to primitive tribes who flung victims over a cliff to propitiate their gods . . . or burned human sacrifices alive on an altar. I understand that all World Scientists know exactly the role the donor must play?"

"They don't."

"Then, all you know is that you are the donor? That your friends and family will never see you again? That no one has any idea what will become of your body, even of your ashes?"

"Do you specialize in psychiatry, Doctor? If you do, let me say—for whatever the data may be worth—that my mind is at peace. I'll admit I was afraid once, but the time for that is past."

"Yes, it is past. Still, it is natural for me, as a physician, to wonder whether the Master is ever troubled by the memory of all the brave young men who have died for him. What,

indeed, passes through his mind as he goes about his work in Laboratory I?"

Impatiently, Korson gathered up his books. "I'm sorry I told you I was the donor. The Master has been kind enough to allow me to live here during my last few days. I don't know whether he'll appreciate anyone realizing who I am."

Musing, seeming to not look at the young man but to be gazing into the future, or the past, Everling answered slowly, "It is strange that you should say that. Viewed in a certain light, your position here is the same as that of Tarmo and myself."

"All that matters to me, is that no one besides yourself knows the truth—particularly that funny kid who is your ward."

"Shall we all consider ourselves part of the Master's family?"

"That's as good a way of putting it as any." Korson nodded and walked away through the evening dusk.

CHAPTER TEN

THE MASTER opened the door of a small room in a corner of Laboratory I. In that tiny area, which seemed lost in the great laboratory, were the apparatus and files he used in what was to him his most important work—the creation of a machine through which he could communicate with the dead.

He was firmly convinced that at death human beings simply entered a new type of existence which was, at first, similar to life on earth. He conceived of this new life as infinitely expanding. It was vaster and more interesting than the one type of life he had known. He also believed that

the dead sometimes talked to the living; that they used the living as their method of communication.

Statesmen, rulers, prophets and teachers had used such a means of communication between existences. But for the Master it was impossible. Should he associate himself, even remotely, with anything that might appear unusual or religious, whispers would become more powerful than the long ago wars, and soon there would be no Master.

The only solution for him was to devise a machine through which he could talk with the dead in the lonely isolation of Laboratory I. He had constructed device after device, and always the result had been the same—failure. Hopelessness had dropped a shroud over the whole project. It had been a long time since he had entered the little room.

Ellora was dying. Even if this strange Everling had actually conquered the sickness, she would die eventually. Then she would be *there* and he would be *here*. Trapped. The only link between them would be memory—unless he could devise a machine.

It was vital, now. He must try again.

His last attempt had been an effort to modulate an isolated segment of visual radiation, a beam of lavender light. He concentrated on his notes and diagrams, seeking desperately for some clue.

The visaphone in the laboratory had a one-way visual circuit. There must be no chance of the outside world glimpsing the laboratory's interior. The Master kept the sound circuit turned off, except when he wished to speak to someone. Nothing and no one from outside could reach him unless he desired it.

It was this isolation and timelessness of Laboratory I that caused the Master so often to forget the routines which dominated the world outside. Now, when he glanced up to rest his eyes, he was startled to see that the time indicator showed it was long past the hour of the evening meal.

He rose, switching off the small, intense working light. Tomorrow he might solve the final problem. Or the day after. Or any day. Eventually he must succeed.

Suddenly, the stark isolation of the room closed in on him. She might die while he was here. Neither weird machines, which did not work, nor philosophy could save him. He must remember to tell her. He must.

He closed the door of the little room and left Laboratory I.

Finishing the last amber drops in his glass of Vintage 3085—a good year for the white grapes—the Master glanced down the long table. For days he had been dining alone or with Korson. Tonight he wanted to talk to Everling, so he had invited him and Tarmo. But where was Varden? Just as the Master was about to make inquiries, his chief assistant came in, apologizing.

“Those damn lessons ran overtime. And Moon Base—”

“Varden,” the Master said, “if you use that excuse again . . . What’s this about lessons?” He turned to Everling. “Varden is our social butterfly.”

“Butterfly, hell. This is hard work. Dancing lessons.”

In answer to the Master’s stare of incredulity, Varden continued doggedly. “I don’t intend to get out of touch with everything. It’s good exercise, too.”

Varden sat down and turned to Korson. “I understand that you are here to study with the Master.”

Korson nodded.

The Master added, “My first protege. What are the rules for a patron?”

“The first rule is to break rules,” Everling said lightly.

The Master looked at him. “You should know.”

Everling offered a dish of the crisp, paper-thin rolls to Korson. As he was about to take one, Tarmo reached for the plate.

Shoving it under her nose, Korson said, "Try them. They're better than human fingers."

"You're still angry," Tarmo said as she filled her mouth.

Korson, watching the unlovely gesture, wondered why it seemed so delightful to him. There was magic in this primitive child—at least, for the moment. "Do you like dolls, my dear? Or do you love only wild things like your birds?"

Her green eyes narrowed. "I think *you* are the one to play with dolls, to fondle and caress them. I think you put them back on a shelf and forget them. Unless you are careless and break one. Then you run away and hide."

What was this girl in the saffron robe? Was she child or woman? Or perhaps a sort of human chameleon who changed personality with her moods? Baffled, Korson turned his attention to the conversation between the other men.

"Those who feel they must roam the world for experience and understanding are deluded," Everling was saying. "For, by intensive observation, a man whose boundaries are the four walls of a small area can travel twice as far and learn infinitely more."

"You in your tower," Varden said. "And the Master in World Center."

The Master smiled. "The Doctor's statement is perhaps an over-simplification. My thought is that if a man could come to know a single person completely, he would have encompassed a good part of the wisdom of the world."

"Human vivisection—of the heart and brain," Varden broke in. "A very nasty proposal."

"A psychic intrusion, I grant you," the Master laughed.

The great carved ruby glowed on Everling's hand as he reached for his wine. "And yet a clear view of the human spirit in its entirety would be the most illuminating, exciting experience in the world!"

The Master signaled a servant to refill the wine glasses. Then he glanced at Everling. "One would need to make a

chart of the soul," he said. "Like an unknown sea, full of depths and currents. Swarming with marine life."

"The two of you," Varden interrupted, "are inventing a lot of trouble. What if you soul scavengers chose the wrong person?"

The Master decided it was time to come to the point. "Dr. Everling, let us discuss this another time. I want to know how the Lady Ellora is progressing?"

"She is improving."

"I intend to have a talk with her tonight. I hope there is improvement. If not, I shall call in other physicians for consultation tomorrow."

A sudden sharp sound attracted the Master's attention. At the opposite end of the table a servant was arranging the coffee service meticulously in front of the one chair that directly faced him. The Master's voice was curt. "You know the Lady Ellora does not dine with us."

She stood in the doorway, tall lithe, radiant. Her low-cut robe was almost the shade of lavender that he had struggled with in the little room in the laboratory. Around her throat was a piece of jewelry he had never seen before; a collar of matched sapphires from which hung a single diamond star that nestled between the curves of her breasts. The star patterned after the insignia of the World Scientists.

She bowed, very slightly; a gesture of double meaning. It seemed intended for the entire group but was meant only for the man at the head of the table. As she came forward, her steps gliding smoothly over the polished floor, she said, "Good evening." And, to him alone, "I am sorry Master, that I am late."

Without sitting down, she took a cup and began to pour the coffee. "Will you have brandy in your coffee?" Raising her eyes she looked directly at him.

Suddenly, the realization of one small fact stopped the flood of joy that was rising within him. The collar. She had made

a gallant gesture, but the collar remained, an obvious concealment of the blue mark. Hopelessness clutched at him.

She did not wait for him to reply. Pouring brandy into the cup, she handed it to a servant. Then she turned to Tarmo.

"I've neglected you since you arrived." The rich, vibrant voice flowed like a limpid stream talking in the sunlight. "Let me make up for it, my dear." Her hands went swiftly to her throat. The impish smile he knew so well lurked in the corners of her lips. With a quick movement, she unfastened the collar and tossed the jewels, a cascade of gleaming loveliness, to Tarmo.

The throat was bare now, smooth, unmarked. No blue stigma of the sickness showed on the velvet skin.

As the Master rose to his feet, the scene before him was out of focus and blurred—except for one face.

After dinner, Korson suggested a walk to Tarmo. She led the way, across wide lawns, through formal gardens, past the grove of pines, to a glen where a small stream gurgled and splashed.

Sinking to her knees in the moss she looked into the dark, moving water. "Do you like it here?" she asked. "I found this place the day after they put me behind these walls."

"It's beautiful."

"You're not angry anymore?"

"I never was," he laughed.

"And you believe now that Everling will cure Lady Ellora?"

"Yes."

She dipped her hand into the water. Moonlight caught the ripples as they raced over her fingers. Korson lay down beside her.

"Do you know," she said, "why I had to find this place?"

"Do you *have* to find any place?"

"You must search for the place you want. This was most like it. So I found it."

"Where do you want to be?"

"Back in Cheenwa. In the old tower."

"Tarmo," he said, "listen to me. You are no longer a child. You must learn to live with other people and not shut yourself away in a desolate country. Everling knows that. You can't go back—you can only go forward."

"I know where I want to be!"

He sat up, took her slender shoulders between his hands, giving her a gentle shake. "Wake up, Tarmo! You must make a place for yourself in the everyday world. Find friends. You can't live in isolation forever."

"There is Everling."

"He won't be with you always."

Wide, clear eyes stared up at him, puzzling, musing.

Korson stood up. "Let's go back. I have a great deal to learn—and very little time."

How tall he is, she thought. How strong. His skin is smooth in the moonlight and he moves like a big animal, powerfully, silently.

Returning through the magic of early night, Tarmo stayed close at his side. Sometimes their shoulders brushed. Once she held his hand lightly. The touch of him is good, she thought, and he is my friend. But tonight he will go into the library and I will not see him again until tomorrow.

It was late when the Master entered the Lady Ellora's bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the lounge, he took her in his arms, his eyes searching her throat for the slightest sign of the blue mark. There was none.

"Scientists—myself particularly—are not allowed to believe in miracles. But if this is a miracle, of what importance is science?"

"Don't thank miracles," she laughed. "Thank Dr. Everling."

"Tomorrow he will be duly honored."

He pulled up a chair near the lounge. "Dearest, please listen carefully. I have long been disturbed by the thought that you might want to reach me in Laboratory I, and be unable to do so."

"Don't be silly. Leave the sound circuit turned on."

"It has been my custom to turn it off, except when I want two-way communication with someone outside the laboratory. Until I met you, I could conceive of nothing urgent enough. . . ."

The devil of her half smile found its way into her voice. "Now that you've learned better, leave the switch turned on."

"It is an old habit. I might forget."

"Not *you*."

"I've forgotten many things."

"Surely the incredible Master can write. Put a note on the switch."

"I might not see it," he said impatiently. "Besides, the circuit might be broken, the power might fail. Such things happened before. Three times in—"

"A thousand years," she smiled.

There was no answering lightness in his voice. He was giving an order. "I shall tell you the combination which opens the door of Laboratory I. Memorize it. If you ever need me, and cannot reach me, give the combination to Varden—or even one of the guards."

She could not believe she had heard him correctly. "You've never given the combination to any one else!"

"Nor did I expect to. As you know, I change it every week." He hesitated. "I have thought the matter over carefully. No harm can come of this act. I will give you the combination now."

He made her repeat it after him many times over. At last he relaxed, satisfied that she knew it.

She said softly as she kissed him, "Don't you understand that the tragedies of life are not its happenings, but its fears?"

When the Master left the blue bedroom and descended the curving staircase, his mind was quieter than it had been for a long time.

He opened the door of his study, and tobacco smoke billowed out into the corridor. From the amount of smoke and the half empty wine bottle on the table beside his chair, it was obvious that Varden had prepared himself for a long wait.

"This grape grease is fairly decent." Varden held up the bottle. "How is she?"

"She was sleeping when I left," the Master said, pouring himself a glass of wine. "It has been months since I have seen her doze off so naturally."

"She was beautiful tonight." Varden stared at a plume of smoke which spiraled upward from the end of his cigar. "Now what?"

"Tomorrow I will make a world-wide, special telecast from the tower. I shall announce that Dr. Everling has developed a cure for the sickness."

Varden watched his smoke phantom disintegrate. When the last wisp had vanished, he said, "Master, there is reason now to hope—but isn't it, perhaps, too soon for such an announcement? I can take chances and make mistakes. You can't."

The thin stem of the Master's wine glass gleamed as he turned it between his fingers and smiled. "You sometimes play the ancient game of poker, which seems immune to time. There is a phrase connected with it, 'calling a bluff'.

If Dr. Everling is anything less than an honest man, we shall soon know it."

Yes, Varden thought, he would always be the Master.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MASTER flicked on the Center intercom-visaphone in his study. "Dr. Everling, please."

A moment later Everling's face appeared on the screen.

"Yes, Master."

"Doctor, your brilliant success in curing the Lady Ellora seems proof of your claim to have conquered the disease which baffles orthodox science. Therefore, I have arranged for a special world-wide telecast in which I will announce your discovery. You will receive an award of honor."

"But, Master—"

"Please, do not interrupt. The Council will issue you a grant of one hundred and fifty thousand villars annually for life. You will be given funds for research and the training of other physicians in your methods. However, I must request that you make a telerecord of your methods, and of the training you underwent. Also, a translation and photo-record of the ancient document you discovered."

"Master, I—"

"Come to the telecast tower in ten minutes."

The visaphone screen went blank, but Everling remained motionless, staring into it. His hands reached for the switch, then dropped to his side. Slowly he raised his cowl over his head, the green cloth framing his dark, burning eyes.

Adjusting the folds of his robe, he paced slowly across the exquisitely parquetered floor. When the time indicator on the wall showed that five minutes had passed, he paused before

the long mirror to study his image. Straightening his shoulders, his chin high, he left the room.

When he reached the arched entrance to the building, he glanced at the telecast tower, a gleaming needle pointing to the clouds. Between him and the tower was a paved court. He started to run.

The rising wind whipped his robe and leaves scuffled across the stones.

The lives of the inhabitants of the third planet from the sun stopped; the tools, the jests, the scheming, were laid aside. The thoughts of a race were focused on a spire against the sky and the words which came from it:

"This is a special world-wide telecast from the Center. The Master will announce the discovery of a cure for the sickness . . . This is a special . . ."

In markets, in crowded rooms and lonely places, in shops and laboratories, beside immense machines and among the splendor of tropical flowers, men and women silently watched telecast screens. The horror of the sickness had come from somewhere to Earth. But between men and women and horror stood the Master. As was to be expected, he had found a way to protect them.

Lady Ellora, Varden and Korson sat before the screen in the blue bedroom. Instinctively they had met there—by one of those unspoken understandings which sometimes govern life. Ellora had not been surprised when Korson arrived. And if Varden had not come to her then, the ties which hold friends together would have been only cobwebs.

Everling was breathing hard as he crossed the marble bridge, and jerked open the door to the telecast room.

"Master!"

The tall figure in the blue cape turned abruptly. "Yes?"

"I must speak to you alone. At once."

"This telecast is of greatest importance."

"What I have to say is more important."

This was the thing he had feared, thought the Master. Yet he must face it out to the end. He signaled the telecast engineer to hold the broadcast, and went outside with Everling. As they stood on the bridge, the wind took the Master's cape, spreading it like a great wing, and snatched the cowl from Everling's head.

The Master shouted above the vortex of roaring air, "Be quick!"

"Master!" There was desperate urgency in the luminous eyes. "You have solved unbelievable problems. You have saved a world. But you cannot cure the sickness. I can—if I have sufficient time to finish my work here. A bargain, Master! Your secret of rejuvenation for my secret of the cure!"

Clipped, harsh, came the answer.

"You are a fool if you think I would consider such a demand!"

"I am not asking for eternal life. But I must have another thirty years in order to serve the people of the world as you serve them."

As the Master started back across the bridge, Everling caught the edge of his wind-swept cloak.

"Your duty is to humanity. And I am part of that duty. Neither of us can be spared." Everling spoke through dry, cracked lips. "Grant me this!"

"No."

"Then I appeal to you, not as the Master—but as a man. The Lady Ellora is not yet out of danger. I shall be forced to stop the treatments. . . ."

High on the bridge, screaming wind swallowed the last words, yet they were known, blazoned between them like a challenge.

"You may think that I have used an ugly weapon," said Everling. But you have left me no choice. With the method of healing in my hands, I cannot stand idly by and lose my last chance of saving men and women."

Uncertainty and blind rage obliterated the Master's reason. He saw below the waist-high balustrade, a drop of seven hundred feet. His eyes traveled from the chasm to Everling and he started forward, powerful hands spread.

"You will not do it."

The Master knew he could not. He was beaten. Ellora must have a chance. "Part of your duty to humanity. . . ." Was he bound to the figure opposite him, unable to go forward without him? Had they been catapulted together in this particular moment in time for a particular purpose? He was convinced there was nothing to do but think it out, play for time.

"I shall cancel the telecast."

People went back to their daily business. Some wondered a little, shrugged, and added another incident to the mystery of the Master. In hospitals, white faces turned wearily away from now blank telecast screens. Doctors and nurses tried, with hollow, professional inanities, to comfort those with the blue mark.

In the bedroom of the Master's Lady, Varden looked at Korson. "How could he!"

Korson felt suddenly awkward. Forcing a smile, he shrugged. "Some change of plan."

"But this was so important! I can't understand—" Varden broke off, "or can I?"

"Don't worry, either of you," Ellora said quietly. "I know the Master better than you. He has his reasons. Dr. Everling has given the world hope. He is a wonderful person."

"Maybe you're right," Varden said, "but I can't get to whatever's inside that green robe."

"You don't like him? Why not?"

"I don't know. Come on, Korson, let's get out and give her a chance to rest."

A few minutes after they had gone, there was a light knock on the door. When Ellora opened it, she found Tarmo.

"Lady Ellora, I—I wanted to talk to someone. Could I—"

"Come in, my dear." Lady Ellora took the girl by the hand and led her into the room, shutting the door behind them. Sitting on the lounge, she pulled Tarmo down beside her. "I'm afraid it's rather lonely for you here. We must find some young girls for you to meet."

Tarmo was startled, murmuring doubtfully, "I wouldn't know what to say to them."

"Nonsense. You can go to the park. Have a picnic, play some games together. There are a dozen games to learn."

Tarmo's hands, hidden beneath the folds of her robe, twisted nervously. "Is the park far?"

"No."

"Because he doesn't like me to go far from him."

"He?"

"Everling."

"When he understands that you will be quite safe, he will agree." A life such as Everling's would not be easy, she thought. Being father, mother and playmate to a young girl was certainly not simple. No wonder Everling was overly cautious.

The glitter of jewels on the dressing table caught Tarmo's eye and she went to look at the sparkling ornaments, sniffing the faint scents that rose from flasks of perfume and boxes of powder.

"Do you swim in the pool?" asked Ellora.

"May I?" she asked eagerly.

"Whenever you wish. You will need a swimming costume. I'll have one sent to you."

"You are very kind, Lady Ellora." A filmy handkerchief dangled from Tarmo's fingers; on it was embroidered the likeness of a flamingo in brilliant colors. "Do you love birds and animals?"

"Yes."

"The birds here are wonderful. I know them all."

"I'm glad to hear that. But you must make human friends."

"My Lady, I think I have."

"Yes?"

"Korson."

Lady Ellora's arm went round Tarmo's shoulders. "Of course, he's your friend. But you are dear to all of us, and we don't want to lose you."

There was a curious, veiled look about the girl. "Lost . . . Sometimes I have felt I was lost. But when I began to feel it, I sent my thoughts a different way."

Does she merely express herself in a fantastic manner, or is there another reason, wondered Lady Ellora. "Surely you have been lonely? Perhaps unhappy?"

"Never. I have been trained so that I do not admit such sensations. It is sickness of the mind which causes these feelings. And I am very healthy." Moving away from the protecting arm, she studied a mosaic set into the wall with interest. After a moment she said in a low tone, "Did the Master tell you why he stopped the telecast?"

"No. Why don't you ask Dr. Everling?"

"He—he doesn't talk to me as he used to. The Master is a wonderful person, but Everling—"

"I understand. A young woman usually believes her father is the most wonderful man—until she falls in love."

"What is that?"

"I cannot tell you. But you will find out."

"I love the trees and the wind."

"That's one kind. Love is the most abused word in our language. It means a hundred things—everything and nothing. You love an animal or a dear friend. Or one man. But it is still the same word."

"There ought to be more words."

"You are right." Lady Ellora stood up. "You must go now, my dear. I shall see you at dinner."

CHAPTER TWELVE

LONG GOLDEN arms of late afternoon sunlight probed Terra City. They slanted across the shoulders of a tall man standing beside a pool. The man noticed how the sunlight painted the still water with brilliant red and orange reflections from the clouds overhead.

A servant came noiselessly into the patio and switched on a small telenews screen recessed into the wall. Dimly, as from very far off, the voice of the announcer reached the Master's mind.

"Union of North Europe reports more than 1500 deaths resulting from the sickness. Trans-Northland reports . . ."

He went to the set and turned it off. Returning to the pool, he sat on a weather scarred sandstone bench and covered his eyes with his hands. He did not realize Everling had approached until he heard his voice.

"Good afternoon, Master. Have you reached a decision?" The cowl was thrown back and his eyes were as expressionless as two holes bored straight into eternal darkness.

"The secret of everlasting life is not mine to give. It belongs to the world."

"Then why not give it to the world?"

"It is the one discovery that men must not know."

"Why, Master?"

"We are not discussing that point."

"But it is a point."

The master nodded.

"You have seen proof," Everling continued, "that my work is the only known solution to the horror of this disease. Certainly it is reasonable to allow me another thirty years to complete what I have begun?"

"Obviously, Dr. Everling, the decision involved is tremendous. The secret has been guarded as nothing else on this earth. If misused, it could turn whole planets into gigantic slaughterhouses."

"I do not understand."

"Of course not."

"The secret will be safe with me."

The Master rose to his feet. "Why do you want it?"

For a moment Everling appeared to be plunged in uneasy thoughts and did not answer.

"Perhaps," The Master continued. "you believe the Council knows the secret. They do not. I alone know it."

Everling moved a little, restlessly, seeming uncertain. "Master, I have given my life for science and medicine. It is true that I am not a World Scientist. But are two silver stars the measure of a man's genius? Is the organization of World Scientists designed to rule—or to rule out what they do not understand?"

"If to be a World Scientist is all you desire, I can arrange for a special order."

"That will neither give me back the years I have sacrificed, nor time to finish my work."

"I have offered you rewards and honors but you refused them."

There was deep, passion in Everling's voice. "It is justice I want!"

"I have searched for it longer than you."

"Your pardon, Master." He was calm, now. "Ultimate justice is something that I—and probably even you—can never understand. Let us rather say that, although I have not received human justice, I desire to serve humanity. Only with another thirty years can I accomplish this."

The Master, his body sagging a little, his hands trembling like those of an old man, forced his answer through stiff lips. "I need time to think. Wait. . . ."

Everling seemed to be observing something of very great importance in the depths of the little pool.

"The Lady Ellora will be waiting, too. . . ."

Without speaking, the Master left him, walking across the patio, past banks of fragrant roses which were beginning to glisten with the evening dew. He entered the low, domed corridor. Here his footsteps took on an eerie likeness to reverberating voices.

Over and over they repeated, "You are the Master. You will have other wives. The secret is not yours to give. Yet, Everling may be right. . . ."

Hollowly, the footsteps seemed to linger behind him, wisps of sound that were trapped and doomed to whisper endlessly.

A little way down the corridor he met Varden, who was carrying a chess board and a box of men.

"Did you go to bed last night?" Varden asked.

"No."

"I thought so. How about some chess?"

The Master shook his head, the pathetic ghost of a smile crossing his face. "You might beat me. If you want to play, Dr. Everling is in the patio. He told me he understood the game."

Varden lingered, his mind a turmoil of questions, his eyes on the face of the man who was both his friend and the Master. That he carried a heavy burden was obvious, and Varden wished to share it. But, as he started to speak, the Master, anticipating his words, turned from him and, with

a wave of his hand that meant dismissal, went on his way.

Tiny eterno-lights, automatically turned on, gleamed here and there among the trees. Everling and Korson were engaged in a conversation which, Varden realized at once, was about to expire.

Placing the box of chessmen on the table, Varden opened it. Korson disclaimed any knowledge of the game, but Everling accepted the challenge with obvious pleasure.

"Most interesting and excellent mental discipline."

Taking a black and white pawn from the box, Varden shook them in cupped hands behind his back, and extended two closed fists. Everling tapped the left. It was the black pawn.

For an instant Varden considered what opening he should use. There was no use trying any of those weird openings the Master was always springing on him. He didn't understand them, and doubted if the Master did. Use something simple—why not queen's gambit?

To his surprise, Everling accepted the gambit. Varden played slowly, blocking every positional advantage gained from the original pawn sacrifice. But somehow Everling developed a remarkably strong position. Everling sat back and smiled.

"You play well."

"I keep in practice, playing with the Master." Varden studied the board, wishing he had castled earlier.

Everling increased the pressure. His handling of the diagonals and his bishops—which he had refused to exchange—was deft. Varden struggled out of one trouble into another. Moving his king-knight's pawn, Everling said, "Check, discovered."

Korson, who had been wandering around the patio, said, "The Master must be a difficult man to beat."

"The Master plays the game to win," said Everling. "That is the only way to play any game."

Suddenly Varden saw it. The last play had been only a nuisance check. There was nothing behind it. One move to escape check, and he would be free to force a bishop exchange. Next the double check with knight and queen—and it was over.

He moved out of check. Everling looked at the board a long time. The stylized wooden pieces reflected the soft glow of the lights. Finally Everling made an ineffectual rook move. He glanced up at Korson. "One who wants to win above all else will win."

Varden forced the bishop exchange and they played in silence for several moves. Then Varden completed his plan by a move which made the passing of a pawn inevitable.

Everling studied his position, smiled, picked up his king, and handed it to Varden. The chief assistant was surprised at the traditional gesture of resignation.

"You have proven my point," Everling said. "My attention wandered—and I lost."

They were replacing the men in the box when Tarmo ran out on the patio, wearing a bathing suit.

"Come for a swim, Korson."

"Good idea." He got up. "Water therapy is the only treatment after being exposed to chess."

Tarmo was already on her way, calling, "Come, Korson!"

Varden watched Tarmo as she ran. Suddenly he felt Everling's eyes upon him. "Your ward is a lovely child," he said.

"She is."

"Or should I say a beautiful young woman?"

Everling did not answer. Now he was staring after Tarmo.

Refreshed by the swim, Korson dressed for dinner and entered the library. He found it empty except for a beau-

tiful and unusual woman. Although he had seen only pictures of them, he was sure she was a Venusian. She had ripe-olive skin coloring, three-fingered hands, and slate-gray eyes. Around her neck was the traditional high, rose velvet collar which concealed her vestigial gill-slits.

Seeing him, she stood up. She was tall for a Venusian. "I greet you, sir."

Her pronounciation was remarkably clear. Only the soft, high-pitched syllables remained of the lisping Venusian speech.

Korson bowed. "You speak our language well."

"Learn, I must. I am secretary to the envoy of Venus. He talks with the Master." Her head turned slightly, toward the closed door of the study.

Sinking again into the deep-cushioned chair, she leaned back languidly, her golden robe accentuating the delicate contours of her body. Korson realized why Venusians were characterized as exquisite.

For a moment, he considered the standard archaeological puzzle as to whether the Venusians had once been Earth dwellers who migrated after one of that planet's periodic cataclysms. It would explain the mythology which inevitably associated Venus with the goddess of love. But the Venusian's gill slits, indicating recent amphibious existence, did not accord with the Earth-life theory. After all, the surface of Venus was eighty-seven and eight tenths percent water.

She smiled with the gracious courtesy of a lady welcoming a guest into her home.

The strange, exotic quality of her entranced him and he came close, his gaze challenging, direct. "You're very bold, Earthman."

"Is boldness unrewarded on your planet?"

"Wisdom rewards."

"I do not understand." His eyes continued to travel over her. "How old are you?"

"Forty-nine Venus years." She smiled at his surprise. "That would be thirty Earth years."

He realized that she was looking over his shoulder. Tarmo's footsteps on the deep floor-covering had been unheard by him, but the Venusian's acute ears had caught them.

She bowed her head in greeting. "I am Venusian. In your words, my name is Zaline."

"I am Tarmo." She was edging back toward the door.

"Stay, Earthgirl." Zaline went to Tarmo, took her arm and, folds of the robe Tarmo wore, she asked, "Why do you not wear finer robe?"

"Everling chose this for me."

"Oh Earth!" Zaline laughed. Slipping her hand into Tarmo's, she pressed it gently. "To make yourself adored, choose for yourself. Jewels, flowers, robes. *My* purpose in life is to attract. That is why I exist."

Tarmo flashed a quick glance at Korson. "I will see you at dinner." She ran out of the room calling, "Goodby, Zaline!"

He watched her go, and looked back at Zaline. "You have taught her something, I think. Perhaps it will make her happy. I'd like to do something for you. Entertain you."

"Tomorrow show me Terra City."

"You've been here before."

"Some of city I see. Gay parts. Not real parts. Meet me outside old rocket junk yard. At the sunset."

The door to the Master's study swung open and the Venusian envoy entered, his face deeply lined, his eyes dark circled. There was an edging of sweat around the conventional high collar.

Zaline made the introduction. "Ambassador Imptoli, this is Korson."

"I greet you." The Venusian nodded and sat down.

"Good evening, your excellency. I have always wanted to visit your planet. I have often read about it. But I have seen no record of your having anyone similar to the Master."

"Never is need for Master. To make happy our lives we use machines. *They* do not use us. We fight not among ourselves."

"Do you believe the Master is the only one in the universe who does not die?"

"You are a World Scientist. Belief is for children. Facts are for men. I possess no factual evidence that there is one besides the Master who never dies." The Venusian rested his head against the back of the chair. "I have weakness," he murmured. He unfastened the high collar.

Korson gasped as he stared at the brown throat. Between the gill-slits was the mark of the sickness.

Imptoli looked up and followed Korson's eyes. "Yes," he said, "from Earth comes strange gifts. Yet we blame you not. All planets are daughters of the sun. Their fate the same."

Unnoticed, the Master had entered the room. "There is hope, Imptoli," he said. For an instant he thought he should say more. Accept Everling's bargain, now that the scourge had spread to other planets. Why hesitate? Yet, he did.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

VARDEN maneuvered his way through the crowds in the street. In two hours it would be Carnival night and the pageantry of the world's history would be relived at the Pavilion. With every citizen in costume, the city would assume the appearance of a gigantic stage, and its population, actors.

At the moment, however, Varden's mind was not concerned with the Carnival. He was wondering why the Master continued to withdraw from all his normal associations. Grave and silent, he wandered about his museum or isolated

himself in Laboratory I. Confiding neither in Varden nor the Lady Ellora, he made evasive answers when cautiously questioned. Often Varden found him alone in his big chair, with Flim's great head resting on his knee.

Even on this Carnival day, the Master had spoken only once to Varden, and that had been a brief visaphone message which had sent the chief assistant on his present errand.

Working his way around a man in a sixteenth century French costume who was arguing with a woman dressed as a twenty-seventh century Izonian, Varden opened the door of the Ronding Biological Institute.

Although he well knew that Ronding had never been noted for the orderliness of his laboratory or the length of his temper, Varden was unprepared for the madhouse which he entered. Beakers, pipettes, carboys, spirals of tubing were scattered about the long tables as if flung by the hand of some fretful giant. His feet crunched on fragments of broken test tubes.

Ronding, his back to Varden, faced a little group of technicians. Between bursts of profanity, he was snarling something about an experiment.

"You goddamned idiots should be unloading cargo on Mars. Biologists—hell! You waste my time with the results of this experiment. Why? Because it happened to *be* an experiment. What do I care about it if it doesn't prove anything?"

Ronding paused to suck in a new supply of atmosphere, and one of the technicians said, "That's the way science progresses. You make an experiment and report your data. Then, science—"

"Science. It's a word, nothing else!" Ronding hurled another test tube into the far corner of the laboratory where its fragments joined half a dozen others. "We are not concerned with abstract science. We are fighting the sickness."

Now get back to work and use your heads for a change.

They straggled away and began to clean up the shambles on the tables.

Varden moved closer, grinning broadly. "Trouble?"

Ronding spun around. "Hell's fires—oh, Varden. Well, I've plenty of trouble without you."

"Won't you ever learn that it takes time to make a biologist?"

Ronding stared at the ceiling in despair and disgust. "How did you ever get to be chief assistant? You're worse than those morons over there"—he jerked his head in the directions of the lab technicians—"who claim to be scientists. What the hell are you bothering me for, anyway?"

"The Master asked me to find out whether there is anything you need."

Leaning against a table, he rubbed his eyes with his hands. "There is. But you can't give it to me. Nor can the Master."

"He has instructed the Council to give you what you ask."

Concealing hands dropped from the man's eyes, and Varden noticed they were red-rimmed and very tired.

"Not what I need."

"What is that?"

"I need," said Ronding, "human beings who have just contracted the sickness."

"Haven't you called for volunteers?"

"Of course. They came for a while. But after the Master called off the special telecast, they lost hope and quit."

"You must have already collected sufficient specimens?"

"I need cases of the disease in its early stages. You know how suddenly the mark appears—often on awakening in the morning. Or in the middle of a day's work. Sometimes there is only half an hour between the appearance of the first faint signs and the mark's complete development."

"I would have thought," Varden said, "that the first in-

dication of the disease would cause people to come to you."

"When people get the sickness they try to conceal it—even from themselves. The handful who have come here were nearly dead."

"We can't force anyone to come. The law cannot be broken, even by the Council."

"I know." Ronding extricated two crumpled cigars and shoved one at Varden.

Varden took it and lit his and Ronding's.

"Why did the Master call off that telecast?"

"I haven't the slightest idea." Varden sucked on the cigar and coughed.

"There's something odd about . . ." Ronding's voice died slowly and, as it did so, his eyes became alive—first incredulously, then with expanding realization, and finally with a bright and sparkling certainty.

On the floor before him was a broken beaker. The half sphere of glass had become a mirror which reflected the concentrated image of a man. The man in the reflection was squat and deformed, his body fading away into a vague blob, his head distorted upward into a fantastically elongated face.

The strange trickery of the light and the curvature of the glass had brought the man's throat into exact focus. There, sharp and clear, was the blue mark of the sickness.

Ronding's steady fingers touched his throat and, as he did so, a hand entered the sharply focused area on the broken beaker and the fingers pointed to the blue mark.

He spoke with infinite serenity, "Now I have a chance." Then he was shouting commands at the technicians.

Varden started to say something, but the words wouldn't go together. An uncontrollable desire to be back in the Carnival throng, to be an unidentified member of the masses, swept over him. The tumult in the laboratory was so furious that no one noticed his leaving.

An ominous clatter met Varden as he entered the Center. He was trying to identify the sound, when a strange figure stalked across the courtyard, arms outstretched. It was dressed in a knight's full armor. Varden stopped the specter from the past with a firm hand against its breast plate.

"Glub?" came a plaintive query from behind the closed visor.

Varden raised the visor. "Which are you?"

"Koom," answered the entombed one.

"Sorry, I lost my atomic torch. You'll need it before the night's over."

Koom gazed at him with icy superiority. "Nothing is sacred to you."

"Why don't you join the percussion section of an orchestra?"

"I prefer to dress with some dignity for the Carnival. It is a traditional celebration. A person should honor it without frivolity. Your clown suit is laundered and pressed. You will find it on your bed."

Varden stepped back and saluted.

Slamming down his visor, Koom stalked away with a fateful clank. As Varden continued on his way, he wondered if the Master knew that his museum was minus a piece of priceless antique war costume.

It was late afternoon when Korson reached the rocket junk yard. The Venusian was standing by the gate. For an instant the guard hesitated. But the stars of a World Scientist were enough, and he swung open the great doors.

Here, assembled as a vast storehouse of scrap metal, was the history of man's effort to escape into space. A hundred types of crumbling ships towered into the sky.

Briefly, Korson explained the saga of Earth's tragic efforts to accomplish what Venus had known so long. Zaline was silent as, walking from ship to ship, he outlined man's

battle for the beyond. At last he said, "Why did you want to see all this?"

"For the sake of one man."

"The ambassador?"

"Yes."

"You love him?"

"Truly, I do."

"What has the rocket junk yard to do with it?"

"Because of these ships there is on his throat the blue mark."

Suddenly he visioned the junk yard filled with jet men, sphere-spinners, magno-balancers, astrographers. Ghostly figures thronging round the battered ships. What would be the ultimate result of all this? Expanding life—or death from the sickness? Oppressed by the mood of the place, he remained deep in his thoughts until Zaline's soft voice broke in.

"Take the Earthgirl She is good."

Korson answered firmly, "I have a reason."

"Reason and love go not together."

He knew he could say it. It would be safe with her, but he would not.

The strange eyes probed his face. "I sense a trouble. But you desire to keep it secret. So I do not ask. It was wrong to come here when he is dying of the sickness. Forgive."

"There is nothing to forgive."

A tiny vibration of sound, on the edge of audibility, murmured in the falling light. It was the day, the hour, the instant when an ancient rocket fin had decided to let go. There was the crescendo of parting metal, and a broken knife-edge crashed to the ground.

It had fallen only ten feet from them. Her three fingers slipped into his hand. "It happens so," she whispered. "Strange is fate."

Staring up at the dark, twisted mass of space ships above

them, she added, "Earthman, in this physical world planets do not mate. Only love and tragedy do. Come, we go now."

Tarmo watched the eterno-lights flicker on the surface of the water as she poised herself on the diving board, ready for the spring. The sound of running footsteps caused her to pause and look around. Korson, in his bathing trunks, was chasing Flim, who had made off with his sandals. When she was sure that Korson had seen her, Tarmo dived and swam across the pool.

Korson gave up the pursuit of Flim and ran to the pool, his body arching into the water in a racing dive. Clear to the bottom he went, swimming underwater to the end of the pool where Tarmo lay stretched out on the tiles, and cautiously rose to the surface at the edge. Silently, his arm stretched out toward her ankle. He did not see that she had picked up a leafy branch which the wind had torn from one of the Mozette trees.

The branch thrashed down hard on his hand. Jerking back the hand, he laughed up at her. Tarmo leaned far over the edge, trying to slap his face with the branch. Grabbing the end, he pulled sharply.

Caught off balance, she fell, the water splashing high, a crystal screen around the two of them.

It was no longer a game as their bodies slid together, twisting and struggling. Korson twined his legs around hers, so she could not escape. Tarmo's arms went around his neck, pulling his face closer, her lips lifted for his kiss. Desire and longing swept over him, but before his mouth touched hers, the specter came between them. The fifth day.

Roughly, he gripped her encircling arm, breaking her embrace, and swam away. As he climbed out of the pool, Tarmo called after him.

"Korson!"

He did not look back.

Dressed, Korson sought the library as a sanctuary. Four walls of ancient wisdom and philosophy surrounded him, as did the musty scent which is peculiar to libraries throughout the centuries. He opened a volume and tried to bring his ideas into sharp alignment. This, he thought, is why I came here. It is all I want in the time left to me.

A huge lighted globe of the Earth persistently distracted his attention. Impatiently, he switched it off. His mind at last became absorbed in the book, and he did not hear the door open.

Tarmo was still wearing her bathing suit, over which she had thrown a long cloak. I am sure the sun will rise tomorrow, she thought. As I know that, I know also that he loves me. He must be taught not to fight me any more.

Her hand covered the page he was reading; she pressed close to him, moving her cloak so that it was not a barrier between them.

"I came when you called me," she whispered, and ran her hand lightly through his hair.

He did not move or look up. I could have you now, he thought. But that would leave something only begun. I am concerned only with endings.

"I did not call."

"I heard you thinking about me. In the pool, under water, I heard you."

He stood up, taking her firmly by the shoulders, and moved her back from him. "It's been a pleasant visit. Now, run along."

There was a low, savage tone in her voice. "A little while ago you wanted to be near me!"

"That was a little while ago," he answered coolly.

"You held me close to you."

"Only because you expected it. Because it amused me." He must make her dislike him, even hate him, if he could.

He sat down and opened a book. "Go feed your birds. Play with the dog. I've got work to do."

She could not believe it. She dared not. What has he done that makes white seem black? What have I done? I do not know anything at all if what I felt is false. White is black. Black is white.

Slowly she walked down the long room to the door and stopped to say, timidly, "The Carnival is tonight. Will—will you take me?"

Without looking up he muttered, "I've no time for carnivals!"

It was almost ten o'clock on Carnival night when the Lady Ellora entered Tarmo's room. She found only silence and emptiness. A black domino lay crushed on the floor, and a transparent undergarment clung limply to the edge of the bed.

She sought for some clue as to what had happened. The room spoke eloquently of turmoil and confusion. But why? Yet how ridiculous it was to attempt to fathom the motives or moods of others. It had been tried since time began and still no one ever really knew another.

She left the room in search of Korson, whom she found in the library.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but I'm worried about Tarmo. She isn't in her room and I haven't seen her all evening. Her costume is missing. Except for this." She held out the domino.

"I can't help you. I haven't seen her since this afternoon." He rose, dignified, yet with a certain awkwardness that did not escape her. "Perhaps the guards"

She was standing near him and he felt her presence as something more real than a physical touch. The essence of her being flowed out to him, surrounding him with its understanding and compassion.

"Why should I call the guards," she said, "when I have

the best of all guards beside me—your love for Tarmo. Go, find her yourself.”

Korson shouldered his way through the crowd in the Pavilion. It was between acts of the pageant, and the dance area was jammed with wildly gyrating celebrants. A tall man in a beggar's costume marched by, carrying a girl who clutched a glass of wine, tilting it back in an effort to gulp a few mouthfulls.

Someone doused him with iridescent rainbow fluid. Three men were singing, “Space Ain’t so Deep as Other Things.” Two attendants stopped a fight. Fireworks laced across the sky. Another fight started while the announcer’s voice boomed.

“The second half of the pageant will—”

Then he saw her.

Tarmo was sitting at one of the tables on the balcony which surrounded the open-air dance area. She wore the costume of an Arabian dancing girl and was obviously the cause of a dispute between two men.

Korson climbed the balcony and went to the table. “Tarmo!”

She looked up. “Hello, Korson. Good-by.” Moving closer to one of the men she smiled seductively, reaching for his wine glass.

“I’ve come to take you back.”

“I won’t go!”

One of the men stood up, scowling, “Take her where?”

“It’s none of your damn business!”

“Oh, have a drink and forget it—” He broke off suddenly. “Uh—is she your girl?”

Korson nodded.

The man sat down again and, shrugging, glancing at his companion. “Little family quarrel, I guess.”

An Arabian dancing girl was picked up bodily by a man

dressed simply as a World Scientist and carried, kicking and screaming, out of the Pavilion.

In the shadows of the trees, he put her down.

"You wanted me," she said. "You wanted me, Korson!"

He took her radiant face between his hands and lifted it into the moonlight. "Yes, dearest, I wanted you."

Shadows engulfed them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

VARDEN was vanquishing a hangover when the Master's voice summoned him from his shower. He stood, dripping, before the visaphone.

"Yes, Master?"

"Come to my study at once."

When he entered the room, Varden found it dim, the drapes still drawn over the windows, the Master a hunched figure in his great chair.

"You know that the Venusian ambassador has the sickness?"

Varden nodded.

"Do you connect the occurrence of the sickness on Venus with Dr. Everling's theory?"

Varden was thoughtful for a moment. "In one way, yes. I think you realize that I do not like the man. But I must be honest. His theory that the sickness is partly caused by a lack of struggle would make Venus an almost ideal place for its occurrence. Could it have originated there? The life on Venus is certainly the easiest in the solar system."

"I have been reasoning along the same line. Dr. Everling's theory is certainly unorthodox. Yet, who knows?"

Varden shrugged.

"Wouldn't it seem logical," the Master continued. "for me to discuss the matter with the one person who has experience with both Dr. Everling and the sickness?"

"Lady Ellora?"

The Master nodded.

Entering the blue bedroom without knocking, the Master found a tray of breakfast, almost untouched, beside the bed where Ellora lay. Gently he kissed her. "Dearest, you should sleep longer in the morning."

"Always telling people what to do."

Was there a trace of agitation in her manner, he wondered. "And you must eat all of your breakfast."

He saw her fingers nervously touch the silk cord of her bedjacket which was fastened closely about her throat. His hand reached out and her eyes watched, wide and helpless. Jerking the cord, he thrust aside the collar of the jacket. On her throat was the blue mark of the sickness.

A few minutes later, Everling entered the study where the Master sat, apparently engrossed in some papers. Actually he was still trying to control the cold rage that had swept over him in Ellora's room and to think clearly.

The man from Cheenwa stood near a globe of the Earth, idly spinning it, until the Master spoke.

"Dr. Everling, I accept your proposition. I will reveal to you the secret of eternal life."

"When, Master?"

"Tomorrow night at nine o'clock, in Laboratory I. Now—go to my wife and save her!"

In the blue bedroom, Everling took a small amber vial from its plastic case and placed it on the table beside Ellora's bed. Quickly he filled a hypodermic syringe. He glanced at her expectant face.

"Yes," he said quietly, "this nightmare through which you

have been passing will soon be over. Rest. Dream of green hills, clear waters and far places. I shall give you the injection now. When you awaken, it will be to a new and brighter world."

His movements were rapid, but sure. They were the motions of a man in high excitement, yet with the self-control to master it. Holding her white arm, he drove the needle home; his thumb began the slow, steady pressure on the plunger. Ellora's eyes closed, and a half smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

As Everling withdrew the needle, the buzzer of the vis-phone sounded softly. He laid the syringe on the table and went to the set. The face of the Master appeared on the screen.

"Everling?"

"Yes, I am with her. There is marked improvement. She must rest, now."

"Then there must still be hope."

"More than hope. I will cure her, Master."

Everling turned back to the woman on the bed. "You will slip slowly down, down a gentle spiral, into the depths of sleep. . . . the depths of power . . . the place where you find a renewal of that vitality which is your right . . . sleep . . . peace . . . sunlight in the woods where your footfalls are muffled . . . Remember the days of your childhood . . . long, long ago. . . ."

Picking up the vial, he returned it to its case and left the room.

In the grove of great pines, Tarmo lay on her back, arms supporting her head on a cushion of emerald moss, damp and sweet. She was saying, happily, "We'll have a small house and a big garden. And dogs."

Korson said nothing.

"We *will* have dogs, won't we?"

He kissed her. "Dear heart, we won't have any dogs. We won't have anything. . . . *I am the donor.*"

It must be a joke, she thought. But his expression frightened her and she appealed tremulously, "Korson . . ."

"It is true, Tarmo."

As she realized he meant it, she screamed, pressing a hand hard against her mouth, "No—no!"

He caught her in his arms and she clung to him desperately.

"You must go away. I'll help you! We'll go to Cheenwa—deep in the forest. They can't find us there."

He shook his head. "No donor has ever run away."

She could not mistake the acceptance of his fate, the calm refusal to consider any alternative. She ran from him, then, running to find a refuge—as if a refuge would blot out the horror and it would exist no more.

Everling went into his room and crossed to the mirror over the big, carved chest. Gazing at his reflection, he touched the deep crow's feet beside his eyes and the few touches of gray at his temples.

He heard a low, convulsive sobbing, coming from Tarmo's room, which adjoined his own, and hurried in to her.

She lay face downward on the bed. Sitting beside her, he put his arm around her shoulders. "It surely can't be that bad, my dear."

The calm, rather hoarse tones, familiar all her life, racked her nerves. She looked up for a moment into the curious probing eyes which seemed to bore into her skull. "How do you know!"

Such dominance and vigor were in his smiling face that, if she had not been overcome with grief, it would have dazzled her. "You know nothing!"

"This is a great day," he said. "when I explain, you will forget to cry."

"Korson told me that *he* is the donor!"

"Yes. I knew it."

"I begged him to go to Cheenwa. To hide. But he won't try to save himself!" Springing to her feet, she cried, "He can't go into Laboratory I and never come out again! We love each other!"

"I am sorry."

She dropped to her knees before him and took his hands in hers, pleading. "You can do anything. You always helped me. Help me to save him!" She bowed her head in his lap.

Above her, Everling's face was immobile as he stroked her hair. "You're very young. There will be other young men."

Her head came up; her voice rang with final conviction. "There will be only one love."

He moved restlessly, as one who tries to hold in check a flood of exultation and triumph. Fire glowed in the great ruby as his fingers closed tightly, then loosened to pluck at the folds of his robe.

Her eyes on the red spark, Tarmo cried. "Because of the Master, Korson must die. I hate the Master!"

Everling put his hand under her chin, tilting back her head; she felt the brilliant, hypnotic eyes upon her.

"Soon I shall be powerful. Very powerful. The time has come to tell you my plan. . . . For many years I knew that too much power in the hands of one man was dangerous. A hundred things showed this clearly. Things that went wrong all over the earth. Yet no one was strong enough to rise up and act against him. No one clever enough to think of a way to overthrow him. In the past, nations fell into darkness and decadence under the heels of dictators. It has always happened. It will always happen. But now the entire Earth is at stake!"

He stared past her, envisioning the day, now so near,

when the peoples of the earth would acclaim their hero.

"There must be change—always change. I heard in Cheen-wa that the Lady Ellora had the sickness. I came here, bringing you, young, strong healthy. I said that I had cured you of this disease."

She stared at him incredulously. "You mean I never had the sickness?"

"Only a childhood illness—nothing more. But, so desperate was the Master that he clutched at any hope. And I achieved a bargaining position, exactly as I had planned." He bent over her, closer now, his breathing quicker, heavier.

"But Korson?" She did not fully realize the whole meaning.

"If I save him will you do something for me?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Promise!"

Her gaze was frozen upon the glowing eyes opposite hers. "I promise."

"Before Korson dies, I will know the Master's secret. I will live forever. *I will be the Master!* He has been the abomination of this earth for too long. My task is to end tyranny!"

"How will you save Korson?"

"Before he enters Laboratory I, the secret will be mine, and the Master will either be dead or under my control. Then I can free Korson. The curse of the donor will be over forever. Korson will live—and you will keep the promise you have made."

"What must I do, Everling?" she whispered.

"When I am Master, you will be The Master's Lady!"

He pressed his body against hers, his strong fingers loosening her robe. As their flesh touched, she sank into a black pit of oblivion.

Korson paused before the door to the Lady Ellora's room. Should he disturb her? No matter how it all ended, she

was entitled to whatever peace she could find. Yet he knew that Tarmo would need her badly when he was gone.

The door was slightly ajar. As he opened it, he said softly, "Lady Ellora?"

She was in bed, but her eyes were open. They were vacant, expressionless.

"I want your help, Lady Ellora."

The head resting among the pillows did not move.

"Please, Lady Ellora!"

Still, she did not move nor answer.

"How do you feel?"

"I feel very well, Dr. Everling."

"I am not Dr. Everling. I am Korson." Worried, he studied her breathing and the pallor of her skin. "Do you feel better today?"

"Better today, Dr. Everling." The words came parrot-like from her lips.

Korson glanced at a shaft of sunlight which cut across the bed. "You'd feel better if the sun were shining, wouldn't you? But this is a gloomy day."

"A gloomy day . . ."

He took a cigarette lighter from a pocket of his tunic. Slowly, he passed the intense white light across Ellora's eyes. She did not blink.

He switched off the lighter and glanced at her bare white arm. The puncture mark was clearly visible. And, as he saw it, the sunlight glinting on the syringe caught his eye. He picked up the glass cylinder and tilted it. The few drops of remaining liquid moved sluggishly.

Dropping the syringe into his pocket, he stood looking down at the Master's Lady, speaking as if she could understand him. "This must not be."

Tumult blasted at Korson when he entered Rounding's laboratory. Rounding was inoculating a guinea pig. Korson,

shocked, wondered if it were really Ronding, the great biochemist. This haggard, unshaven man seemed to have no relationship with the inspiring teacher he knew.

Korson noticed that Ronding often paused in his work and wiped perspiration from his face. Yet there was something incredible about the man, as if dust on its return journey to dust had already revealed the living core of energy which it had so long hidden.

Korson approached. "Dr. Ronding?"

He turned. "What the hell do you want?"

Korson held out the syringe. "Whatever is in this must be analyzed at once."

"What do you think this is, an elementary chemistry lab? Get out!"

"This is vital to—"

"Get out!"

"The Lady Ellora."

Ronding said something that might have been an apology and lit a cigar. Through the smoke, the bloodshot, weary eyes were as piercing as ever. He took the syringe and carried it across the laboratory.

Only a few minutes were necessary for his analysis. Writing down the formula, he signed his name and handed it to Korson. With his teeth clamped viciously on the cigar, he growled. "If this is connected with the treatment Lady Ellora is getting for the sickness, you'd better move fast, young man!"

Outside the clinic Korson read the formula and notation. The drug Everling had injected was nothing but norcozyne. It produced a state of lethargy, followed by a temporary burst of synthetic energy. It cured nothing.

Once more he saw Lady Ellora, lying helpless in a hypnotic trance, drugged with norcozyne. Precious time had been wasted, hopes raised—all useless.

An instant later his jet car was speeding through Terra City traffic.

Turning the car over to a guard, he strode through the gates of the Center. In the anteroom he grabbed the visaphone from the clerk and called for the Master. The operator informed him that the Master would receive no calls that day.

He cursed the operator, the gods, everything, and ran to the Master's library.

The room was now as familiar to him as his own laboratory. He looked about, but the Master was not there; only the shelves of books and the glowing eye of the great globe.

A guard stood in front of the door to the Master's study.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"I must see the Master. It is very important."

"My orders are to admit no one."

"You must."

"I am sorry, sir."

"Surely, if I write a message, you could step inside and hand it to him?"

"The orders are specific. He must not be disturbed by anything."

"Where's Varden?"

"In the telecast tower, I believe."

Back through the corridors Korson went. As he crossed the court, he glanced up at the tower, and saw Varden crossing the marble bridge.

"Varden!" he called.

Varden waved his hand and came down the curving stairway.

At the foot Korson met him with a grim, set face. "I must see the Master at once! It's vital. But he's left orders that he will see no one—receive no messages. *You* could get to him."

"Not today."

Grabbing the chief assistant's arm, Korson persisted, "You don't understand. This is deadly serious!"

The stocky, ruddy-faced man regarded him with kindly eyes, in which there was a trace of disappointment. It is because of the girl, he thought. He has found he cannot face death; he wants her too much. He wants to live and hope for a reprieve. The best thing is to blast his hopes at once.

Varden's casual, good-natured air gave way to his official manner as he answered, "There is nothing I can do. And if you could see the Master, you would be disappointed."

He walked on past Korson, cool and implacable.

This, Korson thought bitterly, is the absolute end, the final irony. He had done what he could. His hand crumpled the paper with the formula. And after all, nothing mattered to *him* anymore.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE NINTH day of Month 13, year 3097, dawned clear and calm. Sunlight caught the peaks behind Terra City and began working its way down into the valleys. Night mist was sucked away from the cobalt sky.

On the grass behind a one-story, low house that looked like a giant, glistening cube of sugar, two boys were playing a game of their own invention. It involved racing, tumbling and amicable fighting.

Their shouts roused a woman who sat near a window, reading a book of ancient history. She looked out, smiling

at her children playing in the sunlight. How tall and strong and handsome they would be when they were grown!

A group of seven girls in their teens were beginning a picnic. They sang as they put up a net for a game of ball, lusty young voices throbbing in the clear air as they attempted to harmonize. When the net was up, they started the game, calling to each other as the big ball flew through the air.

"Tomorrow's the party!"

"Going with Leveg?"

"I like Jorgex better—"

"What'll you wear?"

Outside the great gate of the Center, the guard was at his usual post, moving a few feet in one direction or the other. His thoughts wandered . . . They come, they go, watching their own feet, all-important feet on the slick pavement. No one really knows where his feet are taking him. . . . The guard jerked to attention as one of the passersby nodded to him.

He decided that it was very possible he might become a poet or a great writer of some kind. He would write a book so fine that it would be placed in the library of the Center. Perhaps in the Master's own collection. Not science, certainly. He was tired of that. Romance, adventure on one of the planets, perhaps. He had always meant to be a wanderer, himself.

The guard would have liked to scratch his neck. However, a large group of people entered the Center, on their way to the museum. He stiffened to formal attention. To a poet they were a flock of sheep, nothing more. To a poet who wished to scratch, they were an even worse nuisance.

After the visitors had passed, the second guard said, "Hi, robot."

"Robots would do better at the gate," growled the first guard as he scratched vigorously. "That's what we'll become, in time."

The first guard did not answer.

After a moment the other man added, soberly, "Have you noticed there's something oppressive about this place today?"

"There is. And I haven't seen the Master for three days."

"Neither has anyone else."

"Something *could* happen. . . ."

In his study, the Master stirred uneasily in sleep, awoke to a half-doze, and discovered that his cloak had twisted uncomfortably about him. His body stiff, he got up with an effort and removed the cloak, letting it fall to the floor. His mind was clearer but, as he slowly crossed to the window, his steps were uncertain, tottering.

His hand, opening the window, was deeply wrinkled, the veins thick and coarsened, the skin spotted with brown. He looked out, and watched Flim who was stalking a bird among the flowers.

It was noon when Tarmo left her room and went down to the garden. The Center seemed oddly hushed; no voices, no bustle of activity. No one moves around me but ghosts, she thought. I feel no pain, no sorrow for ghosts.

A flood of sunlight warming her body made her look up and, raising her arms like a pagan goddess, she cried, "Stop! Stop the sun for one day!"

The sun of the ninth day of the Month Thirteen, was touching the horizon. Korson was reading a book which had been given him by the Master. The book was entitled **THE BITTER ONE? A LIFE OF FORONI**. The Master had circled a passage on the last page:

Just before Foroni's death in 2907 he said:

"That death does not exist—at least as the term is understood—that this inevitable happening is merely a not very radical evolutionary transition is, to me, obvious. I have already presented the evidence and reasoning on which my conclusion is based.

"However, as men would suffer any torture rather than to think, I do not expect them to pay the slightest attention to anything that I have ever said."

It was evening of the last day. The solar system hurtled at approximately nine miles a second towards the star, Vega. Everling stood on the terrace, gazing into the night. He might have been a cosmic pilot, guiding the solar system to its proper destination. Already he had come a long way, and when the new dawn rose, he would have traveled farther than any other man.

Alone in his study, the Master's thoughts spun out from a dark core of anguish. Everyone would be in the drawing room for after dinner coffee, he thought, envisioning their faces.

Korson and Tarmo loved each other. How many loves are found too late? How many eager, seeking hearts love, and are not loved in return? How many ever find the flame for which they starve? And how many flames joined only when they went out.

Korson loved Tarmo. In two hours He must extinguish both flames in Laboratory I. Varden had told him of Korson's frantic request for a meeting and he was convinced that the young man desired an extension of the time allotted to the donor. Desired it because of the girl. Somehow, though, he could not understand Korson pleading for a reprieve. . . .

Dressed in a wine-colored robe, her hair caught up in

a net spangled with sapphires, Lady Ellora poured coffee from a golden urn and handed the cup to Varden. It would be a difficult evening for all of them and she was determined to keep the conversation in a light vein for as long as she could manage. "What is this story I heard about your doings at the carnival?"

"Obviously, a lie."

"And last year?"

"Also a lie." He grinned. "I'm surrounded by spies."

Everling walked down the long room to where Tarmo sat. In her big chair she looked like a lifeless rag doll which someone had tossed aside. Her face was as white as the creamy satin robe she wore. He stooped, murmuring to her in a low tone.

Varden turned back to Lady Ellora. "There are times," he said, "when I feel mildly violent toward that man. Like wanting to cut his throat, for instance."

Lady Ellora put her hand on his shoulder. "He is strange, I grant you. Rather barbaric, or pagan."

As Varden lit his cigar, he saw her eyes wander to the door.

"I wonder where Korson is?" she murmured, almost to herself.

Bending his head close to hers, Varden said in a low tone, "I do not want to upset you, but there is something you should know—whether the Master agrees or not."

"Korson." She nodded. "You are not violating a confidence. He is the donor. The Master told me."

"He must tell you everything."

"No. But I like to think he trusts me as he does you."

Varden was silent a moment, then said gruffly "Tonight won't be easy for any of us. I have an appointment in the city. It's business, but I can put it off and stay. . . ."

She shook her head. "What good would it do?"

He shrugged helplessly.

"Talk." She bit her lip to stop the trembling. "Say any-

thing. The space between each of us here is a vacuum."

Over his face came a mask, a bright sardonic smile. He turned toward Everling. "Are we social outcasts, Dr. Everling?"

From Tarmo's side, Everling said, "I'm afraid I was meditating on my past. And nothing is duller conversation than reminiscence."

Varden picked up a plate of sweets and carried it to Tarmo. She took one of the candies. "That doesn't apply to you, Tarmo. You're too young to have a past."

Dully, she answered. "I was wondering why the Master was not with us at dinner."

"He's probably wasting time with that Moon Base affair."

Her nails dug into the palm of her hand. Why doesn't the Master come? What has happened? Where is Korson?"

And, like an evoked spirit, he stood in the doorway.

"Sorry I'm late." He went to Lady Ellora and, somewhat hesitantly, bent over her hand and kissed it.

There was only one person in the room he wanted to see, the slender girl in the satiny white robe, with black hair falling upon her shoulders, who nervously twisted a pearl bracelet between her fingers.

"You are beautiful tonight," he said to her. "Like a bride."

Everling gave an angry start of surprise, and broke in quickly. "The reason the Master is not here seems obvious to me. He has undoubtedly shut himself away to work out some difficult scientific problem."

Is the man blind? thought Lady Ellora. This was Korson's and Tarmo's last minutes together. "Dr. Everling, there is something I want to ask you." Taking his arm firmly, she led him away toward the cabinet of music recordings. "One of these came today. It is said to be an old folk song of Cheenwa, and I would like your opinion."

The music was not too loud, but sufficient to create a barrier between them and the young people.

Without looking at Korson, Tarmo rose as if pulled by a magnet. His hand clasped her small fingers and they went across the thick pile of the carpets to a windowed alcove, half concealed by folds of heavy drapery.

If only I could disappear among these folds and take him with me, she thought. But if he knew what I am now, he would not come with me.

In agony, he watched the shadow of the wild, laughing creature she had been. So quickly she has turned from everything in the world, because I am leaving it. He felt the tense, hot hand gripping his own. "Tarmo . . ."

Her whisper was low, but insistent. "I want you to remember something! Anything I do is for you. Anything I have to give is for you. Will you believe that, always?"

If only, she thought with vacant eyes, I could clean my mouth. There is a taste in my mouth as if I had been drinking blood. A taste of iron, warm and hot, as though I had killed and eaten. . . .

She touched his chest, then his face with her hand. "Whole. Quite whole," she said in a tone of wonder. "I don't know what is real, any more. Korson, is the moon blue or silver?"

What caused this melancholy fantasy, he wondered. She is very young. She must not leap from the dreams of childhood to the regrets and uncertainty of old age. "Tarmo, you must not be sorry—not even for yourself. You, too, must remember something. I might have come to this last night without knowing there was a you."

"And if you were free? If this were not the last night?"

His voice was harsh. "There is no escape, and you know it." For the last time, he put his arms around her. "Goodby, beloved."

The music stopped with his kiss.

Slightly apprehensive, Varden eyed Korson as he approached the table where the brandy decanter and glasses

were. But Korson smiled and said, "Do you own that stuff, Varden?"

Lady Ellora's voice sounded feverishly bright. "I'm a miserable hostess."

The clear, dark fluid gurgled pleasantly into Korson's glass.

"Brandy is my favorite drink," Everling said. "An inspiring liquid."

"Does your genius need an aid to inspiration?" asked Korson, with unconcealed sarcasm.

"Relaxation might be a better word. That peace which comes from the gentle glow of the kindly drink."

Korson's laugh was short and curt. "I grant you that certain men are in need of peace. Do you dream, Dr. Everling? Do you have nightmares?"

"I sleep like a child—"

"Of the devil"

Sharp and quick, with the tone of authority he so seldom used, Varden broke in, "Come, Doctor. You need a refill." Everling followed him to the decanter.

Korson, now alone with the Master's Lady, spoke urgently. "Lady Ellora, I know something of the greatest importance. I must reach the Master. How can I do so?"

"There is no way."

Once more the unfathomable weakness attacked her; she could no longer stand, and sank into a chair. He must hate me, she thought. This tall, imperious, tender young man. She was mistress of the Center, of the place which had doomed him.

He bent closer to her. "You would know how to find him if anyone does. Only two minutes to talk to him—now!"

The luster of her eyes was veiled by sadness. "If there were a way, it would do no good. If you were my own son, I could not save you."

Soundlessly, Everling had come near enough to overhear

the last words. "It is surprising that he would wish to be saved."

An instant after the words left his mouth, the blow struck squarely. Everling staggered back and dropped, sprawling, to the floor.

Darting across the room, Tarmo knelt beside him, terrified that he might not keep his promise to save the life of the man who had struck him down. Her hand touched his hair, his cheek. Korson looked down at them, cold and hard.

"Tarmo, did you ever have the sickness?"

"Yes!"

Everling got to his feet, waving away Varden's gesture of assistance. "Our young friend is zealous in his search for truth. I trust he is satisfied."

Varden scowled, knowing something was behind Korson's action, yet inclined to attribute it to the strain of his last night of life. Both men wanted to spring at each other's throats, but could not find the reason.

"We were all impetuous once," the hoarse tones continued. "Enthusiastic, following the rules, our feet never straying from the wall-defined paths science laid out for us. It is understandable." He bowed to Lady Ellora. "Now, if you will excuse me . . ."

With dignity, Everling walked the length of the drawing room, Tarmo beside him and, in silence, they disappeared from view.

Three pair of eyes avoided each other. Finally, Korson said, "I apologize to both of you."

"Forget it," Varden told him. "Look, Korson, I'd like to stay with you here, for—"

"Hell no!" Korson interrupted. "Do you think I want to play chess?" He held out his hand.

Gripping it, Varden tried to say something, realized he could not, and went out.

The Lady Ellora said, quietly, "I want to play chess."

The sound that came from him was the wordless protest of humanity against a destiny it cannot fathom.

Her frail arms closed tightly around him, cradling his head. Forgetting pride, he sought the woman's kindly strength. It is almost ludicrous, he thought. Both of us doomed. She, tender and sad for my fate, and I for hers.

After a moment he moved out of her embrace, smiling, "We could go out in clouds of glory, with vine leaves in our hair—but we won't.

"Let's do a decent job of it, Lady Ellora. Let's not break the glasses at ten. Lord, I don't know how to say things. I'm only a biochemist—but a damn good one!"

"You are, surely."

"Don't wreck it. And don't wait here with me. Go—now!"

He felt the light pressure of her lips on his. Then she was going away, her slender figure poised, head high.

He was alone, now. Emptying his drink, he poured another. It was the one time in a man's life when he was most free. Free of the niggling, inconsequential happenings of today—any day—free of yesterday, free of tomorrow.

He glanced at a time indicator. The dial markers stood at 9:07.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN LABORATORY I, the great machines squatted like shadowy monsters that had been frozen in their death agonies. The wall illumination had been turned down to a faint glow, and the only brightness was the single beam of light focused on the desk.

It seemed to the Master that the tall figure of Everling in

his green robe and pointed cowl was a character from some ancient oil painting; not a man, but a specter that had stalked out of the childhood of humanity.

He looked at the time indicator. It was less than an hour until Korson would arrive. The matter at hand must be finished, and quickly.

From beyond the shaft of light slanting down to the desk, came the deep, compelling voice, "For longer than I can remember I have desired to see the interior of this place."

"Undoubtedly. However, you are here only because I must keep an agreement. So I shall be brief." He placed one hand, palm down, upon the top of the desk and rubbed a long finger over the dry, discolored skin. "What causes men to age?"

"It is a cosmic law of the life force."

"Which I have broken? Men do not break cosmic laws. And I am a man."

"Nevertheless—"

"Nevertheless you are neither a logical philosopher nor a good pathologist. *Men age because of a change in their blood.* That is the reason why all men are not deathless. The only reason.

"The individual organs of the body are potentially immortal. But a man is a unit—not a set of organs. What unified him? It is the ever-flowing river of blood that connects and integrates the organs. A man is as old as his blood."

Everling started to speak, but a motion of the Master's hand cut him off.

"As the various organs of the body take on nourishment and give off waste products, the composition of the blood slowly changes. Each organ poisons the others. The blood becomes that of an old man; eventually, of a dead man.

"That change is absolute and irrevocable. Science, with all its knowledge, cannot alter it. Even the Master cannot."

"But," said Everling, "with massive transfusions of young blood—"

"It would not work."

"Why not?"

"First, every drop of blood must be removed, and the circulatory system cleaned. Were the smallest amount of old blood allowed to remain, it would act as an antagonist to the new blood. The old man would die as swiftly and as surely as if he had been given a transfusion of the wrong type of blood."

"Also, and this is the strange fact which I do not pretend to understand, the young blood must be from a single individual of the same sex. Remember, you are not simply transferring blood—you are transferring that which holds a living creature together. You are receiving not a set of organs, but a unit."

"Finally—and in this case you were partially right—there is what you called 'life force.' Each organ has its own life force. This can only be renewed by a brief period of apparent death. During that period, the organs will take in energy from the eternal well of youth, and return to the period of their maximum vigour."

"Now, if you nourish those regenerated organs with the blood of a single young person of the same sex, and if that nourishment flows through a cleansed circulatory system, the old person will become young. And that is an actual cosmic law."

Everling was silent a moment. Then he said, reflectively, "It is more complicated than I had anticipated."

"Truth is never simple. Only half truths are simple."

Everling was staring at the Master with growing realization and amazement. "But to do what you have said you would be forced to suspend life!"

"Yes."

"Suspend life!"

The Master nodded. "That is my secret."

"By the use of such a discovery all human beings could have their youth renewed." Everling's tone was biting. "By what perversion of thought does the Council allow you to keep the secret?"

"They do not know it."

"Why not?"

The Master's fingers impatiently tapped the desk. "I did not say that I could make *old* blood *young*."

"But—"

"Think for a moment. If my secret were known, the world would instantly be filled with a race of vampires. Every man and woman would spend half his life struggling, scheming, killing to obtain precious young blood. Every child born would be another potential source. At maturity, he would become a hunted animal. I know which temptations men can stand—and which they cannot resist. Worst of all is the desire for renewed youth."

The cowed head nodded in agreement. "You are right, Master."

"From the very beginning, I realized the possible consequences of my discovery—both for good and evil. Therefore, I did not disclose my secret. I had done my experimental work with animals. Dogs cannot talk.

"In those days, when humanity was disintegrating because of war and the inability to control the machine, the great Conference of Scientists was called. I went before that gathering and proved my discovery—without revealing my methods. Then I proposed that one man, and only one, be made immortal. And that he should be the Master.

"They debated for several days, and finally agreed to my plan. As they had no choice, they selected me as the Master."

"And you have guarded your secret ever since?"

"Until now. If you will follow me, I will show you the key to potential immortality."

Walking across the great laboratory, the Master touched a button and the panels began to drop into the floor. When the first panel was completely down, he pointed to the nude young man in the scintillating mist.

"My first donor."

Everling threw back his cowl, and stared intently at the entombed figure. Then the man from Cheenwa rapped on the plastic cover of the cabinet.

The sound echoed in the laboratory, but the man in the cabinet did not move.

"But," he whispered, "he seems alive!"

"He is neither living, nor dead. His life is suspended, and has been for ten centuries."

"The real basis of physical life," the Master continued, "is not chemical, but electro-magnetic. I discovered a way to make that life force inactive until I wish to reactivate it."

"What is that strange mist around him?"

"That is the fluorescent effect of the force field which I have created in the cabinet. It is that field which suspends the electro-magnet potential, or 'life force'."

"Why does he stand so straight?"

"His muscles were taut when his life was instantaneously suspended. The muscles will remain so."

Everling's thick brows drew together. "Why not kill these men?"

"There are many things which even the Master does not know. One is *exactly* what happens after death." His finger pressed the second button and the panels began to rise into place.

"I believe," he added, "that death is a beginning, not an end. But many of the men in those cabinets did not share my belief. Therefore, I have kept them here, hoping that some day I will find a way to return to them the only life they were sure of. This life."

"Thirty living dead men!" Everling whispered hoarsely.

The panels were down, except for the last two. These two cabinets remained open—and empty.

"You noticed, Dr. Everling, that there was an urn in each cabinet. Those urns contain the old blood from my body which was exchanged for the young blood of the donor. If I can discover a way of making old blood young, my secret can be revealed. Then I can give these men back young blood. And their lives, which I stole."

"What prevents the force fields escaping from the cabinets?"

"The walls of the cabinets are double. Between those walls I have created a second field which balances the primary field and contains it within the cabinet. It took a long while to work out that problem. At first, the fields had to be constantly renewed."

The Master went to the two empty cabinets. Behind him he heard the slow, measured footsteps of the doctor. He became conscious of a queer illusion; from somewhere far off a faint voice seemed to be warning him not to take this final step.

"When the donor arrives," the Master said, "he will strip and enter this cabinet. I will then adjust the force field and the insulating fields. For an instant, the donor's life will be suspended."

"Why do you not adjust the fields before the donor arrives?"

"The fields must be adjusted *immediately before the donation*. An individual's life force is not static, but constantly changing—even from hour to hour."

"When the donor's fields are set, I can release him from suspended animation. He returns to his last moments of life and steps out of the cabinet. I then instruct him how to adjust the fields. Next, I strip and step into the other cabinet. The donor anesthetizes my arm and inserts this needle into a vein."

The Master indicated a large hypodermic needle which was attached to a length of flexible, transparent tubing. The tubing emerged from the inner side of the cabinet.

"After which," Everling said eagerly, "he closes the door of your cabinet and adjusts the fields according to your instructions."

"Exactly. There is only one more step. The donor enters his cabinet, inserts a similar needle into his arm, and closes his door. When he shuts that door the master switch is automatically closed, and the whole affair is turned over to the time clock, mounted between the cabinets."

"The actual donation," Everling interrupted, "is automatic?"

"Yes. For an hour, the world's only Master is the time clock. After that period, my door is automatically opened, the force fields are shut off—and I return to life and youth."

"How are the fields adjusted?"

"I will show you."

He led the way to a large control panel in the center of the laboratory. The panel was studded with knobs, switches, dials and indicators.

"The adjustments must be unbelievably complicated!" There was something rather like panic in Everling's unnaturally high-pitched tone.

"No," said the Master. "I have simplified them and made everything possible automatic. This was to minimize any chance of error."

A brief sigh escaped Everling. The Master wondered if he had actually heard the sound or not. He was annoyed, for it seemed that he was missing something of significance.

"These are the controls for the donor's cabinet. These are for mine. These four knobs are adjusted until the dials read so."

Swiftly, he instructed Everling. The Master was amazed at the rapidity with which Everling's mind grasped each point.

When he had finished, Everling said, "Is that all?" He was almost mocking, as if a great deal had been made of something quite ordinary.

"Except that every control on the panel is labeled in code. The key to the code is in my desk. I will destroy it after the donation is completed."

Exultation throbbed in Everling's voice. "When will Korson arrive?"

"At ten o'clock—" The Master broke off. "You knew the donor was Korson?"

"He told me accidentally in a moment of anger." A nervous motion of his tongue moistened his thin lips. "Interesting to know that my new blood will be his, Korson's."

"No, it will not!" It was no longer the voice of an old, tired man; it was the voice of the Master.

"That was our bargain!" Everling's voice was suddenly out of control. "Is your word no better than a cheap liar's?"

"I have kept my word. I agreed to reveal my secret in exchange for yours. I should never have made such an agreement, but I was weak enough to place my love for a woman above all else. I have despised myself for it."

"You promised thirty more years of life!"

His method of escape was technical, unworthy, and the Master knew it. "The agreement was to exchange secrets. You falsely presumed that I also agreed to give you renewed youth. Korson offered his life, as a decent scientist should. But *you* wanted to bargain like a merchant."

The trap was sprung. The Master saw a shiver pass over the man opposite him, saw him grow calm again.

"You have disclosed your secret. Now you wish me to tell my method of curing the sickness."

The Master nodded.

"I believe, Master, that I have been treated unjustly. However, I have saved the Lady Ellora, and I ask one favor.

"What is it?"

"May I experience, for one moment, the sensation of suspended life? To you, of course, it is not a sensation, but for me it has a mystical significance. I would like to enter the donor's cabinet while you adjust the force fields."

What possible harm could come of humoring Everling? the Master thought. There was some justice in Everling's bitterness. "Very well. Strip."

It required only a few seconds for the Master to adjust the controls. He suspended Everling's life for perhaps a half minute, then turned off the fields and opened the cabinet.

Smiling, Everling stepped out. "Thank you, Master." Quickly, he dressed.

"Now, Dr. Everling, what is your method of treating the sickness?"

"I will explain at once. However, I would rather talk in more pleasant surroundings. I am haunted by those living dead men. May we go into your office?"

The Master shrugged. The man was becoming a nuisance with his trivial requests. However, he must have his answer. He crossed the laboratory, and took the atomic torch from its niche. As its rays fell on the opalescent disk, the great slab began to swing outward.

Everling's voice came from directly behind him.

"This is *my* secret!" His weapon crashed against the back of the Master's head.

As the aged body crumpled, the torch fell from its hand. Ponderously, the slab swung back into position, leaving Laboratory I once more sealed from the outside world.

When consciousness returned, the Master tried to move, but he could not. He realized that he was bound and gagged, his body propped against one of the machines.

Everling, a heavy wrench in his hand, stood before him. "I will take my thirty years—and more!" I shall not kill you, yet. For the present you are no use to me dead. Alive, you may become one of my most valuable possessions."

Sitting down behind the desk, he lit a cigarette. "In half an hour Korson will be outside the laboratory. I will open the door by the method you so kindly showed me. Korson will suspect nothing—and I shall be armed and prepared. Fortunately my knowledge of science allowed me to follow your explanation and to realize that the donor need not be conscious. *An unconscious donor will serve my purpose excellently.*"

The Master knew that what he said was true.

"You have already set my field, and I know how to set his. Tonight, for the first time in a thousand years, the world will have a new Master!"

Taking the Master's cape from the back of the chair, he drew it around his shoulders.

The man was insane, thought the Master. It was a fitting ending that the Master, who had been created to save the world from its own madness, should be destroyed by a madman.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT WAS nineteen minutes to ten when Korson heard the tapping of sandals on the parquet floor in the entrance of the drawing room.

As Tarmo came running to him, he called, "Get out. Damn it, get out!"

"I can't go through with it! Not even for you. Korson, the Master must not die. We'd be killing all that's good on earth—"

Roughly he gripped her arm, "What do you mean!"

"I betrayed him—for you. I never had the blue mark or the sickness."

"And you lied!"

"To save you. Everling told me his whole plan two nights ago. He means to kill the Master and become Master himself. He met the Master at nine o'clock in Laboratory I. And he promised to save your life." Abject before him, she covered her face with her hands.

Korson muttered, "I can't get into Laboratory I!"

She raised her head. "The guards?"

"If neither Varden nor I can get in, how can they?" He thought a moment. "There's one chance—Lady Ellora." Grabbing her hand, he jerked her along with him as he ran out of the room.

The Lady Ellora was lying on her lounge, reading, when they burst into the room. As she looked up at them in astonishment, both saw the livid blue mark on her throat.

"There's little time, Lady Ellora. Everling is in Laboratory I with the Master. He intends to kill him and become Master himself."

Her frightened blue eyes stared incredulously at them. "How do you know?"

"Everling told me," said Tarmo. "It was part of his plan to get into the Center—to pretend he could cure the sickness. I never had it and he never cured me!" A sob choked her. "Oh, my Lady, I am sorry!"

"There must be a way into Laboratory I. You know it," said Korson quietly.

Her head turned, to and fro in feverish torment. "I cannot tell you."

"Tell us or the Master will die!"

"It is sacred trust."

"I must get into that laboratory before Everling expects me, and take him by surprise. It's my only chance." Korson was uncompromising.

"If I did as my heart pleads, I would let him die . . . so that he could go with me."

"Then," said Tarmo, "you would not be the Master's Lady."

The child has become a woman, thought Lady Ellora. She sat erect, a final spark of vitality flaming in her face. "Korson, have you a weapon?"

"A World Scientist isn't allowed to carry one."

"Get one from the guards—"

"They must not know about this—they might talk. Too dangerous for the world to know of the Master's one weakness."

"Then . . ." Forcing the words through bloodless lips, each one a struggle against her ebbing strength, she continued, "Come closer . . . the combination cubicle is to the right of the door. The combination is 4-92X-9-7-418-K."

He repeated it once, and was gone.

Dropping to her knees beside the lounge, Tarmo's arms went round Lady Ellora as tears poured down her cheeks.

As Korson slammed open the combination cubicle, fear that in the last moments of his life his memory might betray him, made his fingers shaky. But he set the dials which only one other pair of hands had touched before.

Suddenly, the almost imperceptible cracks in the concrete wall began to widen. The massive slab swung inward.

Korson saw the figure of Everling behind the desk, the folds of the Master's cloak hanging from his shoulders. A hand darted out to grab the heavy wrench on the desk.

Everling came around the desk.

Lunging across the space between them, Korson dodged the blow of the wrench. As he came up, half-crouched, he struck Everling's arm a paralyzing blow with the edge of his palm, causing the doctor to loosen his grip on the wrench.

With his free hand, Everling gripped the collar of Korson's tunic, jerking him forward, twisting the collar in an attempt

to choke him. He must not kill the donor, just render him helpless.

Suddenly Korson's powerful leg thrust between Everling's, tripping him, and he went down on one knee. Flinging himself on top of the doctor, Korson smashed his fist into the man's face. Blood spurted from a cut over his eye. Everling, half-blinded for a moment, could only cling desperately to the wrench, feeling his arm slowly, painfully pressed back and outward, further and further.

Hampered by the long cloak, his movements were clumsy and he could not throw Korson off. At the moment he lost his grip on the weapon, Everling sprang to his feet, the wrench landing on the floor several yards away.

Two savage blows, low on his body, knocked the wind out of Korson. His eyes blurred as he saw the other man make a dash for the wrench. One blind lunge brought him forward, to wrap his arms around Everling's legs and drag him down, just out of reach of the wrench.

Everling launched a vicious kick; his boot caught Korson's jaw, snapping his head back. Consciousness dimmed, but he clung grimly to Everling, and slowly inched himself up along the other man's body. Finally, he was in reach of his throat and, pinning down Everling's legs with his own, he thrust his thumbs into the flesh on both sides of Everling's throat. Fury had erased all thoughts from his mind, except one—to kill.

Slowly increasing the pressure of his thumbs, he saw Everling's eyes begin to glaze. Then Korson remembered that it was for the Master to deal with the doctor; he had no right to be the executioner. Within a second of the kill, he relaxed his grip. Everling was unconscious.

Now, with the eyes closed, the face of the man on the floor was cruel, evil.

Hurrying to the Master, he untied him and helped him to his feet. Shocked at his slow, feeble movements, he felt

deep pity for the trembling old man. Pity, and fear that there was too little time to do what must be done.

"Use me, Master. Quickly!"

"It must be quick—" whispered the Master. The grey eyes flicked down at the prone figure in the green robe. "But *you* are not the donor. *He* is."

"What!"

"Korson, make sure that Doctor Everling is alive."

Stooping down, Korson felt Everling's wrist. "He is alive, Master."

"Find his card which shows his blood type."

Korson searched Everling's clothes and brought out the card.

"What is his type?"

"Type A—Rh positive."

"Good," the Master said softly. "That is my type."

"We know nothing about this man's health. And he's a few years too old."

"He is healthy enough and young enough. If necessary, I can ask the Council to send me a new donor ahead of the usual time."

Still, Korson did not move. "I am the donor."

"And I, Korson, am the Master."

The Master sat alone behind his desk in Laboratory I. He had sent Korson to find Tarmo and bring her to him. He wanted them together when he announced the final decision he had made, which would change their lives, and end this strange affair. Dreading the step he was forced to take, he knew there was no other way.

He rubbed a hand across his forehead as if to blot out something. Yet the same few words were repeated endlessly in his mind—the words which, in answer to his first desperate question, had come over the visaphone circuit from the outside world.

"The Lady Ellora is dead."

Placing his hands on the desk before him, he noticed that already years had gone from them. The flesh was becoming firm and smooth. Soon they would be the hands of a young man. Even now, he felt youth's energy pounding through him.

Varden's voice on the visaphone startled him.

"Ronding wishes to speak to you. Says it is urgent!"

"I will talk to him."

Ronding's excited face appeared on the screen, and his voice boomed, "The drinks are on you and Dr. Everling, Master. I have isolated the cause of the sickness! It is damn virus, terrible and unusual, but still a virus. My findings have been checked by the Council. With the cause known, we'll find the cure. You can tell all the other eggheads that it took Ronding to lick it."

"The world owes you a great debt, Dr. Ronding."

"Oh hell!"

The Master was glad that Ronding could not see his face. "Find Varden and stay with him until I come."

He rose and, with light, vigorous steps, wandered about the great laboratory. He paused a moment to look at Everling, eternally sealed inside the swirling mist; then he pressed the button and the panels rose into place. He went into the little room in the corner of the laboratory, and stared idly at the notes concerning his most recent efforts to solve the problem of communication with the dead. Korson's voice on the visaphone interrupted his thoughts:

"We are outside the door to the laboratory, Master."

The beam of the Master's atomic torch found the disk, and the slab swung inward. Tarmo and Korson entered.

She hurried to him, impulsively pouring out her story. "Forgive me, Master! When I first came here with Everling I truly believed I had had the sickness and that he had cured me. Then he told me his scheme and the part I had played.

Tonight I lied to the others, because he said he would save Korson. Forgive—" Her voice stopped as if unseen hands had closed round her throat, and she stood frozen, suddenly realizing the change in the Master.

He smiled, and his rich, calm tones filled the laboratory. "You have never seen me like this, Tarmo, my dear. The old man you knew and the young one you see are the same person. Korson has told me the whole story. Your actions speak for themselves. The matter is ended, except for something I must do. Something which may seem harsh to you. Come."

Returning to the desk, he sat down and looked steadily at the young people.

"No one must ever know Everling's fate. Nor that Korson was not the donor."

"Yes," said Korson. "I understand."

"You will leave Earth tonight, both of you. And you must never return. You may visit any of the other planets and pursue any work you desire. To the day of your deaths, nothing that is in my power to give will be lacking from your lives. But you must change your names and conceal your identities. Every day you live, you must remember that the fate of the Master, and perhaps humanity, is in your hands."

He paused, looking beyond them at the dim shapes of the great machines. Then, opening a drawer in the desk, he took out a thin sheaf of papers. "I prepared this while I waited for you. You will find here a complete background of fictitious identities for both of you. I have selected names, and sketched the major outlines of your lives previous to tonight. Tomorrow I will have this information filed with the proper official quarters. You will leave on the dawn rocket for Moon Base. Your reservations are made." He hesitated. "Korson . . ."

Korson smiled. "I know. It would be impossible for me to conceal my identity if—" As his hands touched his shoulders

to remove the two silver stars, Tarmo tore them off, laughing, and kissed him.

The Master strode across the courtyard, through the tunnel and up the stairway which led to the blue bedroom.

They were all there, Varden, Ronding—even Flim. Automatically, the group parted before him. He glimpsed the awe and wonder in their faces—but he had seen that before.

Bending over the Lady Ellora his lips touched hers and he shivered, feeling their coldness.

Going out onto the balcony he stood, silhouetted against the star-scattered sky above Terra City. There remained only the ultimate problem that was enclosed by the little room in the corner of Laboratory I.

“And what, oh Stars, is your answer?”

For I should know. I am the Master.